



# Doing Moral Philosophy Without ‘Normativity’

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay challenges widespread talk about morality’s ‘normativity’. My principal target is not any specific claim or thesis in the burgeoning literature on ‘normativity’, however. Rather, I aim to discourage the use of the word among moral philosophers altogether and to reject a claim to intradisciplinary authority that is both reflected in and reinforced by the role the word has come to play in the discipline. My hope is to persuade other philosophers who, like me, persist in being interested in long-standing questions about our morals to be considerably more suspicious about the word’s actual value for us and to see those studying ‘normativity’ itself as having little to offer us when it comes to posing our questions about morals and debating the answers to them.*

**KEYWORDS:** normativity, morality, moral philosophy

## I.

To say that ‘normativity’ is having its 15 minutes of fame in academic philosophy would be quite an understatement. The word has infiltrated every corner of our profession, making it difficult to have a conversation with a trained philosopher without hearing the term or its cognates used—and perhaps even feeling the need to indulge the trend oneself. I think it fair to say, though, that nowhere has the term achieved greater saturation than among philosophers in some way interested in morals. The writing was on the wall back in 2004 when Jay Wallace observed that,

Normativity has been a topic of considerable interest in recent philosophy. In philosophical ethics, for instance, traditional questions about the force and authority of moral claims have increasingly been framed as questions about the normativity of the moral realm. (Wallace 2004: 451)

Wallace suggested calling the then-emerging trend ‘the normative turn’, singling out Christine Korsgaard among its pioneers. That label does not seem to have caught on yet though the (presumably intended) suggestion that we are amidst discipline-wide changes no less sweeping than those that heralded the previous century’s linguistic turn was on point. So, too, the (perhaps unintended) comparison Wallace invites with the dizzying exuberance of some—particularly those intent on accelerating the rotation.



At any rate, the turning appears to have continued unabated. For instance, in the opening lines of an essay penned just a few years later, Stephen Darwall saw fit to put the term ‘normative’ to use not just to frame one sort of question asked by some philosophers about force or authority, but to characterize the entire discipline’s understanding of morality as such:

‘Morality’, as philosophers currently use the term, refers to something different than it does when someone speaks of the morality of ancient Athens or that of Pashtun tribes of contemporary Afghanistan. Neither is it the same as any individual’s morality. What we have in mind in these latter uses are social mores or customs, or norms and values to which some individual subscribes. *Moralities* are identified socially or psychologically, via their acceptance by some individual or group. They are thus items that can be studied by the empirical social sciences, understood broadly, perhaps, to include empathic or hermeneutic *Verstehen* no less than detached observation. *Morality*, as we philosophers now understand it, however, is an essentially normative rather than an empirical concept, however broadly ‘empirical’ might be understood. (Darwall 2013: 3)

Darwall does not quite speak for everyone in the profession, but he undeniably captures the zeitgeist. Vanishingly few of us paid to write moral philosophy would nowadays describe our vocation in terms of critically engaging with a specific constellation of social mores, customs, expectations, feelings, norms, or values—you know, *that* one, with its very particular (some would say, peculiar) social role and history in contemporary liberal societies. ‘Morality’ as it is used by the mainstream professional indeed grasps for something else: its referent, as Darwall says, not identical with any ‘item’ about which the sociologist, psychologist, or historian can ask her sorts of questions, too. Any academic philosopher trained in an Anglophone graduate program in the last few decades will feel at least tempted to assent. Her notion of morality (and probably also of justice, knowledge, meaning, beauty, and much else) is indeed the notion of something ‘essentially normative’, in that very special sense that all of us by now understand.

But does all this turning perhaps suggest that we have inadvertently turned *away* from what is important? The conventional wisdom would seem to be that we have nothing to worry about on that score. Quite the opposite; we hear tell that all this talk of ‘normativity’ is just a new philosophical tool for accomplishing old philosophical tasks. While perhaps implied in the passages above, Steven Finlay makes it explicit:

Although only a recently introduced term of art, philosophical enquiry under the rubric of ‘normativity’ has quickly become a major industry. . . . The explosion of work under this rubric doesn’t signify a newly discovered frontier, however. ‘Normativity’ is merely a new label for one of the oldest and most central of philosophical problems, previously approached through a variety of terms including ‘value’,

‘good’, ‘ought’, ‘justification’, ‘rationality’ and ‘obligation’. So why has this new word been embraced so quickly and widely? The answer is that philosophers are interested in a phenomenon or character taken to be shared by the topics picked out by these terms, but only imperfectly and incompletely picked out by any of them. (Finlay 2010: 331)<sup>1</sup>

It is a bit puzzling, I suppose, that one of the oldest and most central philosophical problems should have gone around without a suitable name for itself for two and a half millennia. (What took us so long? Was it only after Kripke came along that we realized all we had to do was point at it and make a sound?) But never mind that. Now that we finally have a way to refer to the elusive something we have all been clumsily groping at with our heretofore impoverished vocabulary, the floodgates of knowledge are open.

And how, more precisely, is that knowledge to be gained? Well, are there not, after all, plenty of regions of human affairs—*realms* if one is in a regal mood—in which human beings make an array of claims on or about one another’s thoughts, feelings, and actions? Claims about what makes them good or right or elegant or fair or just or graceful or virtuous or well-founded, or . . . along with all their opposites? Politics, law, interpersonal relationships, art, the pursuit of knowledge, and so on—are these not all just so many domains in which ‘normativity’ reigns?

And is it not therefore just obvious that we might shed light on each of them by shedding light on all of them—trading in the study of any of the several species that make up the normative menagerie for studying the normative élan vital itself? Do we not thereby stand to gain insight that is that much deeper?

Indeed, as if to riff on themes of rotation, detonation, and industry, Andrew Reisner expresses this now familiar thought when he invites us to regard what began in the 1990s as marking the beginnings of a full-blown revolution:

When I began my graduate studies in 1997, what might be dubbed, ‘the normativity revolution’ was already well under way. In the wake of influential work by Jonathan Dancy, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Joseph Raz, and Bernard Williams, people studying practical philosophy had become increasingly focused on the general phenomenon of normativity, de-emphasizing to some degree more traditional and narrower inquiries into specific normative topics, such as morality and prudence. (Reisner 2015: 189)

Each of the above four quotations is taken from the opening of its source. Each author spins his own little yarn about ‘normativity’ and its arrival lately on the philosophical scene. But their concatenation also tells a familiar, if not always recited, story: one of marked philosophical advance through the clever invention

<sup>1</sup> Finlay is not quite speaking in his own voice in this passage but rather channeling the prevailing optimism. His own enthusiasm in his 2010 ‘Recent Work on Normativity’ was at least somewhat tempered, and he has lately expressed a more pessimistic view—see especially his ‘Beyond Normativity: Can Metaethics Escape Samsara’s Wheel?’ [forthcoming].

and widespread adoption of this new term, this valuable addition to everyone's toolkit.

Perhaps it looked at first like we had merely found a new way of formulating a few long-standing questions. But it soon became clear we had found much more than that. For what we had found was actually a way of understanding something deep, something concerning the very essence of what those questions were really about. And having recognized that, we could leave aside the imperfect and incomplete philosophical vocabulary of the past, thus connecting up a seemingly diverse range of issues under a single rubric. The narrow inquiries of old could recede into the background. Or, anyway, they could be carved off—delegated to subfields in an ever more efficient disciplinary division of labor. There is still room (perhaps over there in the corner?) for doing 'normative ethics', after all, and 'normative political theory', and 'normative epistemology', and a host of other normative interests to suit any particular philosopher's normative proclivities. What we have discovered—hallelujah!— is how the study of all of these boutique subjects is connected, standing to gain from the appreciation of the role of 'normativity' in each of them and from the enormous strides taken in the 'study of normativity' itself, which comprehends them all.

How exciting, to live in an age of such tremendous philosophical progress. . .

## 2.

Like many philosophers, I find this sea change in the culture of academic philosophy, this normative turn-cum-revolution, remarkable. Evidently, unlike many others, I also find it distressing. My aim in this essay is to voice this distress and invite you—really, to provoke you—to share in it.

My principal target will not be any precise claim or thesis defended in the contemporary debate surrounding 'normativity', however. As you can likely tell, to engage directly on such matters would be to concede precisely what I am not prepared to: that the way the term is nowadays being wielded makes for a valuable advance, such that moral philosophy's 'normative turn' is a salutary thing. Precisely what I mean to challenge is this sort of thought, which I take to be embodied in the quotations above and in the potted little story I concocted from them. Many philosophers thinking about morality evidently do believe this recent turn toward talking in terms of 'normativity' constitutes real progress. My aim is to encourage much more skepticism and circumspection concerning whether this is so, particularly as compared to the optimism right now being enforced throughout our profession.

I really do mean enforced. Indeed, I invite you to think in a more political register while reading this essay than you are perhaps accustomed to when reading a piece of contemporary analytic philosophy. For what is ultimately at stake in the question about how we choose to use the term 'normativity' is, I think, how power is wielded in our discipline: the complex ways it is exercised and justified, both within and across the various branches and subfields of academic philosophy as these are now identified and defined. Ideas about 'normativity' and its importance or relevance in thinking about morality, when operationalized in the discipline,

become claims *to* various forms of intradisciplinary authority, made on behalf of those studying or debating 'normativity'. Their work-product, it is supposed, is of great value or import for the rest of us.

So far as I can tell, this claim to intradisciplinary authority is not so much defended as asserted. And one reason you can get away with such a bold assertion is that the optimistic picture is increasingly and unquestioningly embodied in the manners and mores of our profession. We are all encouraged to use the term liberally nowadays in formulating our questions, labeling our distinctions, naming our subfields, and so forth. These habits are, then, both reflected and reinforced by more formal professional mechanisms, for example, the available options for indexing a paper on PhilPapers or the ways in which conferences are advertised and organized.

My contrarian contention is that moral philosophy's turn toward 'normativity' has not actually helped us to pose our questions or to debate our answers. All that our freewheeling talk of 'normativity' nowadays is *actually* getting us is greater confusion. Worse, its net effect is to reenforce an increasingly entrenched belief that a certain way of arranging inquiry is just obvious or natural. That way of arranging inquiry presumes that those studying 'normativity' itself properly superintend over moral philosophy, as well as all the various other subfields in which other 'normative phenomena' are debated.

In fact, in this respect I believe the present situation resembles the disciplinary politics that led Rawls (1974) to reject similar demands on moral theorists made in the twentieth century by philosophers working in epistemology, philosophy of mind, and the study of meaning. Many of those working in these other subfields insisted that their areas were somehow more 'fundamental' than moral philosophy, such that moral philosophers *had* to take heed of their ideas, arguments, and theories lest they commit some sort of basic intellectual error. Understandably, Rawls adopted a posture of defiance in the face of this absurd demand (though being John Rawls, he did it very politely. . .) He *declared* independence in an address to the profession that explained how morality presents us with its own defining philosophical questions. Answering these questions requires developing and refining distinctive methods, Rawls believed, for which we have a wealth of traditions of moral thought to draw upon. Moral philosophy is best pursued as its own *sui generis* branch of the discipline, in which we ask the important moral questions of the day, argue about the answers, and even (sometimes) find a basis for conviction, all in a way that need not check with or wait upon other branches of the discipline.

In a similar vein, my suggestion is that those of us who prefer doing a more 'traditional' style of philosophical thinking and arguing about our morals should go on with our business as we did before, declaring our independence from 'normativity'. We should stop using the term even casually—to say nothing of endorsing, even tacitly, that it somehow captures something deep or essential about what we are interested in. There is ample reason to doubt that it is actually helping us to frame more clearly what we are doing or trying to do. And in the meantime we continue to propagate the pernicious idea that the normativity-industrial complex with its increasingly prolific output has some inherent relevance for us.

In the coming pages, I make my case for this posture of political defiance. I believe that serious examination of the optimistic picture according to which the arrival of ‘normativity’ on the scene was a boon to those of us interested in morals requires a much more realistic and careful (if still somewhat schematic) look at our own history—a genealogy, if you like, meant to combat the cheerleading history being sold by the pro ‘normativity’ crowd. What *were* moral philosophers doing before we had this new philosophical tool? What *are* we supposedly able to do now that we have it that we could not do or could not do as well before? Just-so stories of rubrics and revolution are all well and good, but how did we *actually* get here, and just what is supposed to be so great about where we now find ourselves?

### 3.

The lexical item *normative* is of course not an invention of philosophers, even if its idiosyncratic use in our profession nowadays is. The word, when it first began to gain traction—at least among moral (as well as political and legal) philosophers—appears to have meant more or less what others outside our discipline still take it to mean. Namely, something like: ‘*of or pertaining to those practices, social expectations, or rules, by way of which people regulate their attitudes and conduct and apply standards of correctness to themselves and/or others when they stray*’. Such was the prevailing—indeed, the only—way of using the term *normative* and its cognates among moral philosophers writing in the prehistoric 1960s, 70s and 80s. This is how the word was used (infrequently by today’s standards) in well-known work by Phillipa Foot, Thomas Nagel, John Rawls, Bernard Williams, H. L. A. Hart, Ronald Dworkin, and plenty of other authors.

Such practices, expectations, and rules—as well, perhaps, as the postures of mind and bits of language by way of which we engage them—as are *normative in the old-fangled sense* (hereinafter: *normative<sub>of</sub>*) do indeed include distinctively moral ones. While there may have been other grounds for doing so, a central point of emphasizing that these regions of human affairs are *normative<sub>of</sub>* seems to have been to remind readers of a plain truth about a central philosophical task. A clear-headed philosopher *can* aim to say something cogent and persuasive concerning the *merits*, or lack thereof, of what is found in these regions of human affairs. Why this should have ever been in doubt is another matter, examination of which would take us deep into the weeds of our discipline’s earlier, linguistic turn. Suffice it to say that, here again, Rawls’ role in reestablishing the viability of moral philosophy beginning in the middle of the past century is relevant (see Reath, Herman, and Korsgaard 1997). Moral principles can be defended or criticized in philosophically rigorous and respectable ways. Or again, a treatment of virtues and vices of character can be offered, which aims to clarify, using recognizably philosophical methods, why the former are to be cultivated and praised and the latter avoided and discouraged.

At this point in the term’s history, there was little inkling of anyone’s getting any additional mileage out of an examination of the ‘normativity’ of morals (indeed, that nominalization was almost never used). When it came to questions of substance, it would have been a rather obvious mistake to suppose that something about their

normative<sub>of</sub> character per se would provide the key because while many systems of social rules and expectations might be internalized and adhered to, surely none was any more or less righteous, just, or otherwise ethically appealing merely by virtue of its being normative<sub>of</sub>.

Here is a quotation from Philippa Foot’s (1972) landmark paper about moral imperatives, which makes this point explicitly: ‘It is obvious that the normative character of moral judgment does not guarantee its reason-giving force. Moral judgments are normative, but so are judgments of manners, statements of club rules, and many others’ (Foot 1972: 310). Provided we do not forget that she here means normative<sub>of</sub>, Foot’s point is clear enough (nor does she want for expressive power to make it). If one’s question is, ‘What grounds are there for following *this* system of rules, expecting others to follow it, criticizing violations, and so forth?’, then nothing would seem to follow from the mere fact that the system of rules in question plays the social role of regulating conduct through its internalization. As the term was used at the time, Foot is *obviously* correct.

What, then, distinguishes more contemporary uses of the term *normative* from this older use, which still predominates outside philosophy? (I set to the side an added wrinkle: the illocutionary force of labeling something *normative* is often precisely to challenge it [e.g., *heteronormative*].) There is perhaps no single answer (this is part of the problem), but I shall focus on one prevalent theme. When one talks about the ‘normativity’ of this or that aspect of human affairs nowadays, the philosopher using the term means to say something in the register of *correctness*. To say of some practice, expectation, rule, value, or consideration, that it is ‘normative’ in this contemporary sense (hereinafter: normative<sub>c</sub>) is to assert something to the effect that it is indeed *really* right or good or just or reasonable or . . . to be governed by that practice, subject to the expectation, reverent toward the value, prohibited by the rule, or moved by the consideration.<sup>2</sup>

While perhaps not the only trend, this usage is evident throughout the discourse. It plays a particularly important role in the expression of thoughts like that found in the passage quoted above from Darwall (2013). But what exactly is Darwall trying to say by telling us that morality as it is understood by philosophers nowadays is ‘essentially normative’?

Let us go slowly. Clearly, the mores, customs, norms, and values of the Athenians or the Pashtuns qualify as normative<sub>of</sub> —Darwall signals as much with talk of ‘subscription’ and ‘acceptance’. In terms of social and psychological roles, members of these communities relate to their moralities much as we relate to ours. That we find ourselves with no basis to accept or affirm their systems of mores—no grounds or cause for applying them to ourselves, for living as they prescribe—is likewise clear. The fact that it is in terms of a distinct system of rules, expectations, ideals, and the like that we see fit to live is uncontroversial.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This last, of course, is what people are evidently after in trying to sort reasons into ‘normative’ and other (e.g., ‘explanatory’, ‘motivating’, etc.) kinds. The confusions introduced in that context are *especially* pernicious. Pamela Hieronymi (2021) makes a case for abandoning that distinction entirely, with which I am in broad agreement.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Williams might have put it in terms of their system of norms being ‘normative *for them*, though not *for us*’ (a formulation found in his *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* [2008]). Heard as a token of normative<sub>c</sub> this might seem to imply ethical relativism. But that is not the correct

From this much on its own, however, we can at most infer that a particular kind of need may arise for us to have something to say about our rationale for living by our system. And indeed, this is a difference between the moral philosopher's interest and that of social scientists or historians. Is that all that is intended? Is the force of saying that our concept is 'essentially normative' merely meant to remind us that *our* morals can present for us a special sort of philosophical problem of supporting or justifying them because they are the ones we live by—a problem analogous to one the Athenians surely faced with respect to their own rather elaborate system of social expectations and one the Pashtuns face with respect to theirs, too?

I find this more modest reading unlikely as an interpretation of what Darwall means to say. For one thing, it would make little sense of why anyone should think our term *morality* refers to something else where, moreover, that something else is *not* to be 'identified socially or psychologically, via [its] acceptance by some individual or group' (Darwall 2013: 3). Darwall's inference, in the very next sentence, that the referent of the philosopher's concept thus belongs in some sort of (presumably ontologically?) distinct category from any 'items that can be studied by the empirical social sciences' (Darwall 2013: 3) likewise seems to suggest that this more modest reading cannot be correct.

A more plausible interpretation is that Darwall is here telling us that among philosophers nowadays it has become commonplace to believe that it is of the very *essence* of what they study that it be the correct standard for living in some much more ambitious sense (though precisely what *this* means is still far from clear).

Suppose something like this *is* in fact what Darwall means with talk of 'essentially normative'. What are we to make of his claim that this is just a part of how philosophers nowadays use the term *morality*? It is, I suppose, something of a perennial vice among philosophers to think it self-evident that in choosing to live by some system of morals one is not merely committed to that system, but committed to its being demonstrably correct by some more ambitious measure: for instance, one substantially freed of the contingencies of one's own location in a particular ethical culture and its history. In that perhaps we can forgive the urge to rush right past the thought 'we may need something ethically satisfying to say to ourselves, about how we choose to live' to the thought 'we had better be able to say why the way we choose to live is in a further way correct, such that we can establish once and for all that there really is no other acceptable choice and thus righteously condemn all other moralities as imposters'. (What was that clever thing J. L. Austen said, about the occupational hazards just *being* the occupation . . .?)

But Darwall may well be right regarding the sociology of our discipline. The idea he expresses *is* explicitly endorsed by plenty of philosophers nowadays; it is implicit in the sorts of claims and modes of moral argumentation favored by

reading. Williams means normative<sub>of</sub> for them, but not for us, which leaves open whether we can condemn them from some more universal vantage point. Williams was *also* a (qualified sort of) relativist, but he notably did not use 'normative' in explaining that position.



plenty of others. There has indeed been a recognizable shift toward precisely this sort of thinking about what makes morality *morality*.

And that is just it. It is a *shift*. Plenty of philosophers who sought to engage important moral questions were, as of just a handful of decades ago, quite happy to exhibit considerable nonchalance toward the sort of issue Darwall emphasizes. It was no part of their conception that in order to be *morality* what they were interested in had to be ‘essentially normative’ in anything like the way(s) Darwall seems to have in mind. Here, for instance, is a rather striking remark from Jonathan Bennett’s essay ‘The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn’ (1974):

I shall use Heinrich Himmler, Jonathan Edwards, and Huckleberry Finn to illustrate different aspects of a single theme, namely the relationship between sympathy on the one hand and bad morality on the other. All that I can mean by a ‘bad morality’ is a morality whose principles I deeply disapprove of. When I call a morality bad, I cannot prove that mine is better; but when I here call any morality bad, I think you will agree with me that it is bad; and *that is all I need*. (Bennett 1974: 123–24, my emphasis)

As I read him, Bennett is making a methodological point. For his argumentative purposes, he does not need more than a realistic expectation that he and his reader occupy (more or less) the same moral outlook. Starting from there, he goes on to make a very compelling philosophical argument about how best to relate the deliverances of conscience to the emotion of sympathy. That is, he does some moral philosophy despite the way in which his conception of morality is not at all like the one that Darwall tells us a philosopher nowadays *has to* have.

Here, then, is at least one clear casualty of accepting without further ado Darwall’s idea that the moral philosopher’s very vocation just *is* to study and debate over something that is ‘essentially normative<sub>c</sub>’. It would take off the table, by terminological fiat, Bennett’s sort of approach.

Why would anybody accept this without further ado?

I am not sure. But I suspect it has something to do with the way the shift in usage has been far from complete. Indeed, though I earlier described *normative<sub>of</sub>* as what the term *normative* used to mean among philosophers, that was misleading. For it is *still* used in that way by them in plenty of other contexts.

This systematic ambiguity has predictably deleterious effects: chief among them is a tendency to slide between these two ways of using the term in a manner bound to engender confusion. The obviously illicit movement in thought from ‘it is obvious that our morality is normative (i.e., normative<sub>of</sub>)’ to ‘it is obvious that our morality is normative (i.e. normative<sub>c</sub>)’ is certainly made more tempting by the fact that we have decided to use the same word. To avoid this sort of slippage—supposing it can successfully be avoided—one must resort to some rather elaborate verbal gymnastics. Here is a somewhat extreme (alas, not altogether unrepresentative) example from leading ‘philosopher of normativity’ John Broome (2013):

I say ‘ought’ in one sense is normative, but I cannot give a rule for identifying this sense. I could not explain the term ‘normative’ except in terms of ‘ought’. ‘Normative’ means ‘to do with ought’, but this ought has to be a normative one, of course. . . . The terminology in this area is confusing because so many words have both normative and non-normative senses. Even the word ‘normative’ has a nonnormative (in my sense) sense. For instance, it may be used to mean ‘to do with norms’, where ‘a norm’ refers to an established practice or alternatively to a rule or requirement. When I need to make the distinction, I shall tendentiously call normativity as I mean it ‘true normativity’. I think it is what ‘normativity’ means to most moral philosophers, if not to some other philosophers and to many non-philosophers. (Broome 2013: 11)

The last sentence is misleading because of its final clause (there are not that many nonphilosophers using the term this way, thank goodness), and Broome probably also ought to qualify the first clause by limiting it to moral philosophers *nowadays*. He would then appear to be saying something similar to Darwall. The non-normative (in Broome’s sense) sense of *normative* is the old-fangled sense. The ‘true normativity’ sense is the one philosophers nowadays mean in talk of, for example, morality’s ‘essential normativity’. The literature is increasingly replete with such efforts at ‘clarifying’ which sense of *normativity* a philosopher means to put into play (*robust* normativity’, ‘*authoritative* normativity’, and even ‘*oomphy* normativity’ appear designed for a similar purpose).

Could we avoid any misunderstandings by being a bit more assiduous along, say, the lines Broome proposes? Darwall, for instance, could have clarified that what he really meant to say was that while the moralities of the Athenians and Pashtuns are indeed normative in the non-normative sense of normative, they are not essentially normative because they are not normative in the true-normativity sense (i.e., not normative in the normative sense of normative). Only our morality is truly normative, he might have emphasized. Less elegant, perhaps, but such is the price we pay for clarity sometimes.

We had probably also better get to work on translations of important papers from earlier eras too, lest we confuse ourselves when we look back on the golden oldies. We could rewrite Foot’s (1972) claim, for instance, as:

It is obvious that the normative (in the non-normative sense of *normative*) character of moral judgment does not guarantee its being truly normative (i.e., normative in the normative sense of *normative*). Moral judgments definitely are normative in the non-normative sense of *normative*, but so are judgments of manners, statements of club rules, and many others.

I leave it to you, dear reader, to decide whether to accept this modest proposal for how we might go about expressing ourselves more clearly.

## 4.

Why on earth *did* we choose the same word for what is normative<sub>c</sub> and what is normative<sub>of</sub>? Clearly, it is no orthographic accident—neither is it an instance of, to quote Nagel in a related context, ‘two disparate concepts finding refuge in a single word’ (1970: 15). Nor is it an organic evolution—the sort of shift in meaning that gradually and naturally occurs in languages over time.

I believe R. Jay Wallace (2004) is exactly right to point to Christine Korsgaard as, if not solely responsible for moral philosophy’s turning, then certainly the figure who played the pivotal role. (This seems to me uncontroversial, and I do not know how to square Reisner’s [2015] omission of Korsgaard with this. Several of the figures he does name seem really only to ‘turn’ because of her.) Indeed, Korsgaard’s *The Sources of Normativity* (1996) marks what is arguably the most significant turning point, namely, the point when we began trying to use the term *normative* to express not just the notion of what is normative<sub>of</sub>, but also of what is normative<sub>c</sub>. It will be helpful, therefore, to look carefully at how Korsgaard introduces her (then) novel and idiosyncratic usage.

Here is a passage from near the beginning of the book, in which Korsgaard is considering an idea about the nature and origins of morality ascribed to Pufendorf, Hobbes, and Mandeville. The idea is that morality might consist in a system of social rules and expectations that were in some fashion ‘invented’ by human beings to serve a vital social function:

But what exactly is the problem with that? Showing that something is an invention is not a way of showing that it is not real. Moral standards exist, one might reply, in the only way standards of conduct *can* exist: people believe in such standards and therefore regulate their conduct in accordance with them. Nor are these facts difficult to explain. We all know in a general way how and why we were taught to follow moral rules and that it would be impossible for us to get on together if we didn’t do something along these lines. We are social animals, and probably the whole thing has a biological basis. So what’s missing here, that makes us seek a philosophical ‘foundation’?

The answer lies in the fact that ethical standards are *normative*. They do not merely *describe* a way in which we in fact regulate our conduct. They make *claims* on us: they command, oblige, recommend, or guide. Or at least, when we invoke them, we make claims on one another. When I say that an action is right I am saying that you ought to *do* it; when I say that something is good I am recommending it as worthy of your choice. The same is true of the other concepts for which we seek philosophical foundations. Concepts like knowledge, beauty, and meaning, as well as virtue and justice, all have a normative dimension, for they tell us what to think, what to like, what to say, what to do, and what to be. And it is the force of these normative claims—the right of these concepts to give laws to us—that we want to understand. (1996: 8–9, emphasis in the original)

Already here we can note how the ground is shifting beneath our feet. Korsgaard cannot quite mean that the answer to her rhetorical question with which she begins the second of these paragraphs lies merely in the fact that these ethical standards are normative<sub>of</sub>. For her opponents—those who articulated a conception of morality as an ‘invention’—certainly did take themselves to be providing an account that could make good sense of *that*. Indeed, Korsgaard’s complaint is closer to being that this was *all* they did. But that is not right either because, as she herself presents them, these figures also believed that their accounts of the sources and origins of these rules and expectations would tend to encourage us to (continue to) adhere to them. In understanding (some of the features of) their actual founding, these thinkers maintained, one might also provide a basis for living by them.

In other words, the problem cannot be that these thinkers, merely by virtue of their emphasis on morality’s history and social role, failed to see that one’s practical commitment to morality might benefit from or even require philosophical argument (‘foundations’). They were not just aiming to describe morality, but also to defend it—their sociohistorical accounts were meant to provide support of just that kind.

What becomes clearer in the next paragraph is that there is in fact a further belief about morality in particular and about what it would take to justify our allegiance to *it*, which is really what leads Korsgaard to want more than what she thinks these thinkers can provide her:

And in ethics, the question 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? . . . The trouble with a view like Mandeville’s is not that it is not a reasonable explanation of how moral practices came about, but rather that our commitment to these practices would not survive our belief that it was true. Why give up your heart’s desire, just because some politician wants to keep you in line? When we seek a philosophical foundation for morality we are not looking merely for an explanation of moral practices. We are asking what justifies the claims that morality makes on us. This is what I will call ‘the normative question.’ (Korsgaard 1996: 9)

We should distinguish five distinct ideas in order to understand Korsgaard’s remarkably rich train of thought in these paragraphs. First, there is the idea of simply trying to understand the origins, in more or less sociohistorical terms, of our own system of rules and expectations. Second, there is the idea that such understanding might offer us *some* substantial support or encouragement—a partial justification for our choosing to (continue to) live within and abide by that

system, so understood. Third, however, there is the claim that this particular system, by virtue of its content on the one hand and by the appeal of other things that draw the eye, is 'hard'—that is, that what morality demands of us (or, what we demand of one another in its name) is, at times, severe.

Fourth, there is a *substantive ethical claim*, that because of that severity, any account of the sort provided by Mandeville (or Hobbes or Hume or . . .) cannot suffice to encourage or sustain morality's vital practical role—that, indeed, our commitment to morality would not and *should not* be sustained by the embrace of such an account. Fifth, there is the idea that this might all be summed up in terms of what it would take to provide an *adequate* foundation, that is, one that succeeds in justifying morality and its right to make its distinctive claims upon us, such that right-thinking people will no longer defect, no matter how difficult or severe those claims are otherwise felt to be.

These five ideas are all woven together into Korsgaard's introduction to her 'normative question'. And what we are here encouraged by Korsgaard to think is that when it comes to answering that question, for all their 'sunny' optimism, philosophers like Pufendorf, Hobbes, and Mandeville might as well be Nietzsche or even Callicles. For, according to Korsgaard, when the moral agent finds herself in the breach, it simply will not do to try to persuade her that she is to take a bullet for the cause by telling her anything of the sort that *any* of these thinkers had to say. Morality's origins and social role are the wrong *kind* of thing to meet this particularly high justificatory burden. We are thus, according to Korsgaard, led to search for a fundamentally different account of morality's claims on us—one that genuinely succeeds in establishing morality's 'normativity'.

For Korsgaard, the quest for the 'sources of normativity' is in that way inextricably bound up with this conception of morality and with her substantive beliefs about what it would take to secure and justify our allegiance to it. The term *normativity* thus tends to encode these ideas about what vital philosophical work it is that 'must' get done and about what sorts of arguments supposedly can and cannot do that philosophical work for us.

And notice how these assumptions are just the ones that might lead Stephen Darwall to say, just shy of two decades later, that nowadays the philosopher's concept of morality is 'essentially normative'. No wonder the philosopher should see herself as relatively uninterested in whatever it is that intrigues the social psychologist, anthropologist, or historian. After all, it is built into the introduction of this new way of using the term that one shall find no ethically adequate basis for affirming or defending our system of social mores by looking *there*.

Pufendorf, Hobbes, and Mandeville (along with plenty of others) all would have objected, of course. It is not that they were unaware that one might look somewhere other than history, society, or psychology to argue on behalf of morality. They just disagreed. That is, they thought that serious examination of both the historical origin and social/psychological role of morality was the only satisfactory way to do all the justifying work that needs doing. Attempts to look elsewhere might even erode what actually binds us all together in moral community. (Foot, by the way, tended to think so too, at least in 1972.)

If any of these thinkers was making a mistake in seeking support for morality this way, it was not a conceptual mistake, but an ethical one. As indeed thinkers like Machiavelli, Marx, Nietzsche, perhaps also Freud in some moods, might all have alleged. According to them, serious examination along these lines would not only fail to justify one's allegiance to morality, but should in fact tend to be discrediting of large swaths of our own system of mores.<sup>4</sup>

A number of more recent thinkers, informed by the insights of these forbears, sound similar themes about morality's nature and origins, sometimes mixing more optimistic and more pessimistic motifs: consider the contributions to moral philosophy of Anscombe, Wittgenstein, Bernard Williams, P. F. Strawson, Annette Baier, or David Gauthier, just to name a few. How, then, are we to characterize the interests and insights of all these thinkers of our past (both more remote and less) post turning? Should their ideas be reframed, perhaps in terms of their having sought out the source of morality's normativity<sub>c</sub> by way of figuring some things out about the source of its normativity<sub>of</sub>? (This seems close to what Korsgaard *does* say of at least some of them in *The Sources of Normativity*: it is how she invites us to view Hume and Williams, for instance).

On the other hand, that was still more or less before the turn. Korsgaard herself could not have anticipated just how profound and far-reaching her terminological choices would prove to be. Now, post-turning, perhaps we should regard these thinkers as unable to see what *we* see. They glimpsed morality's 'essential normativity' only through a glass darkly—a systematic intellectual mistake, understandable from our superior vantage point now?

Darwall's contention about how the term *morality* is used nowadays might seem to imply this. These older thinkers with their insistence on studying the very same 'items' as historians, psychologists, and social scientists could perhaps be interpreted as trying to do something that made a certain sort of sense, especially given their impoverished philosophical tools. But, of course, we know better now. If only they had had *our* concept of morality and its 'essential normativity' in hand . . .

I suspect this last thought will actually be attractive to some—particularly those who see moral philosophy as being in the business of making progress and who, moreover, wish to insist that business these days is good. It strikes me as a thoroughly unappealing, alienated way to relate to our own disciplinary past. Given the wealth of insight thinkers like Korsgaard and Darwall themselves help us to find in moral philosophy's history, I doubt they would want to say it either. But I wonder what exactly is supposed to block the inference if we accept Darwall's suggestion that our concept of morality is 'essentially normative' and gloss this in terms of its being a fundamentally different kind of thing we are

<sup>4</sup> A referee points out that my reconstruction of Korsgaard's (1996) argument may seem to resemble Moore's (in)famous open question argument: one can continue to reflect and ask, 'yes, but why?'. Importantly, however, Korsgaard's primary interest is not in the kind of ontological and/or conceptual point Moore takes himself to be making. On my reading, her contention is closer to this: any 'naturalistic' account of morality cannot provide an *ethically* adequate answer to the question, Why should I be moral? The brand of skepticism she means to answer is much closer to Nietzsche's (whose voice she chooses for her epigraph; see also Dannenberg [2016]).

studying, namely, what was front and center for many of our disciplinary predecessors and what is still studied by the other humanists and social scientists to whom we have to try to explain our work at cocktail parties.

At any rate, my own reluctance to say anything of the sort no doubt reflects my being the sort of moral philosopher who continues to believe, as Darwall and Korsgaard evidently do not, that morality's historical origins and psychosocial role are precisely the right place to look for all the materials to make an honest assessment of its credentials. Those thinkers who pioneered that sort of approach were anything but confused, I would insist. If what we find when we go searching is not 'enough' for our commitment to morality to subsist upon, so be it.

One option, I suppose, would be to label that as *my* favored theory of the source of morality's normativity<sub>c</sub>. Another option, however, might be to say that I do not really countenance morality's normativity<sub>c</sub> after all—I am some sort of 'normative skeptic', some may wish to say, because I absolutely do want to insist that I am interested in the very same kind of 'item' as other humanists. Which is correct? That either of these options is on the table and that neither is especially appetizing is once again telling about how unhelpful the term turns out to be.

In fact, it seems much more clarifying from where I sit simply to refuse application to the term *normativity*, imbued as it now is with so many substantial assumptions about morality's content and what it would take to justify or legitimate morality's claims. There are other, far more helpful ways of framing disagreements with formidable thinkers like Korsgaard and Darwall concerning how it makes the most sense to argue for morality or against it (or, as I tend to prefer, to argue for some parts and against others) in ethically helpful and intellectually satisfying ways.

## 5.

'Ok, but wait,' some will be in a rush to say. 'Korsgaard—and Darwall too—are *moralists*. They are, moreover, *Kantians*'. How much, then, of these observations about their talk of 'normativity'—and perhaps also my reactionary worries about it—is a reflection of these commitments, which are at least somewhat idiosyncratic? Surely there are plenty of others 'in the literature' using the term in ways less bound up with such convictions. Korsgaard and Darwall may indeed say that 'normativity' extends well beyond morality—that it comes in different flavors (aesthetic, epistemic, legal). Yet, undeniably and unapologetically, morality is still for them the normative apex predator, so to say.

Supposing so, might this not all be regarded as an intellectual error in its own right, which others capable of thinking more independently about 'normativity' might help us to see past? This is the general idea that indeed seems to animate those who say that precisely what is so helpful about the term is that it allows us to pick out and study what is common among several philosophical topics. In that sense, a moralist like Korsgaard, even if she helped to initiate our turning, has only turned part way herself and needs a little more help to come round.

Here, we do well to register just how broad the basis of agreement used to be among philosophers interested in morals, across plenty of other vibrant philosophical disputes, that morality *is*, for lack of a better way of putting it, not

just any old species of social norm, but rather a *special* one. Kant and his heirs, of course, believe this. But so, too, do the other moral rationalists as well as their sentimentalist opponents. And morality's great critics clearly think so, too. The unmatched psychological depth and social centrality of the modes of thought, feeling, and motivation we characteristically associate with our morals are equally what prompt Kant's efforts in pursuit of a vindicatory critique of reason, Hume's efforts to provide a theory of our sentiments (along with his ingenious forays into social metaphysics), and Nietzsche's efforts at a radical unmasking by way of (among other things) his dark and disturbing genealogy.

From the point of view of philosophers who wish to think seriously about morality, then, the claim that moving up to the level of the genus shall be of any help *to us* is one that requires an argument. Absent that, then even if one were prepared to say that there is some genus in which morality sits alongside all else that exhibits 'true normativity', the idea that there is something of interest to be *learned* up there where the air is thinner may be yet another instance of what Michael Bratman (1996: 309) playfully invites us to regard as 'genus-envy'.

Yet there are certainly plenty of philosophers who invite us to see the pursuits of previous generations as 'incomplete', 'imperfect', 'narrow', or 'traditional'. Indeed, it is now fashionable among some of those who, just a generation or two ago, would have put 'meta-ethicist' on their business cards (a term that may already connote that ethical insights are gained from movement upward) and have rebranded as 'meta-normative theorists'.

Presumably, these thinkers must either see themselves as having grounds for being considerably less interested in morality—they must think it less central or important, if not to their lives, then at least from the point of view of whatever it is that drives them to philosophize. Or else, if they continue to agree with the tradition in thinking morality *is* special, they must take themselves to have on hand some sort of argument to avoid the 'genus-envy' charge. Such arguments would have to show that morality's specialness as species will be illuminated, rather than effaced or overlooked, by the move upward to the study of the genus.

I should think such arguments would have to be very persuasive to get those of us invested in the more 'traditional' ways to change our minds. From where the tradition sits, claims to be able to move upward so easily are bound to ring false. The idea that one could just ascend the 'normative' ladder runs contrary to something that many moral philosophers have believed across many other great disagreements: that we all of us tend to look out onto the world from a point of view that is thoroughly suffused and saturated by (our own) morality. If that is correct, many an earnest attempt to get 'above' or 'beyond' distinctively moral modes of thinking will be bound to falter. One will be in danger of painting the rest of the 'normativity' in recognizably moralistic shades and tones. Or perhaps one will unwittingly reverse engineer one's theory of 'true normativity' so that it just so happens to vindicate our moral way of life as substantially correct.

Though I cannot defend the charge adequately here, precisely this sort of intellectual error does seem to me endemic. Even as lip service is paid to the idea that this or that theory of the nature of 'normativity' comprehends much else



besides morality, the possibility of sublimation looms large. Characteristic marks of commonplace ideas about our own morals just so happen to come out first among 'normative' equals. That is, what 'the philosophy of normativity' tends to offer us is an image of the world made up of discrete individuals, conceived in substantial isolation from any social and material context, equally possessed of some fundamental capacity for deliberative rationality. The study of 'normativity' thus ensures that we are all very comfortable in our own moral way of life.

These are admittedly bold allegations. I cannot back them up here and that may make them out of bounds. Perhaps the cautious thing to say, then, is simply that the certitude with which those at work on theories of 'normativity' go about their business does not inspire my confidence. I fear their own commitment to their morals necessarily blurs their vision when they are trying to peer into the deep structure of what they claim to study. This is due to my acceptance of what Rawls, Williams, Kant, Nietzsche, Hume, Plato, and lots of the other old-timers all seem to have understood about human beings: our morals will tend to shape nearly everything about us, for better or for worse (this is why I got into moral philosophy, after all).

## 6.

It is time to take stock. I have sought to make a case that for those of us interested in the questions and problems of moral philosophy there is little to be gained from the discipline's turn toward 'normativity' over the past few decades. For one thing, ambiguities between old usages and new lead to hazards—forms of unclarity and confusion, which are difficult to avoid. In addition, at least one now prominent usage is inflected by its origins in the work of Christine Korsgaard. But Korsgaard introduced the term to mark something that ought to be contentious: that morality calls out for a certain, special kind of 'source' in order to establish its justification. It is far from clear how much the term (particularly nowadays, post-turning) actually *helps* us to see clearly the contours of that important problem, much less to argue the merits of the variety of responses to it that have been favored by figures in both our near and distant disciplinary past. And while there are still others who claim to believe the term *normativity* helps us precisely because it allows us to move beyond such 'narrow' and 'traditional' inquiries (or perhaps, some would say, its widespread adoption signals that we already *have* moved on), I have tried to provoke skepticism about why exactly anyone should want to do this and also about whether it can really be done.

What, then, in the way of reform to our philosophical practice do I take all of the foregoing to support? In truth, I think the best thing would be if, as a community of moral philosophers, we could all agree to stop using the term entirely. I do not kid myself, however. Such an agreement is surely out of reach. So, instead, I shall offer a more targeted recommendation, directed at those in our profession whose interest in the term is not yet vested.

My recommendation boils down to this: be *a lot* more suspicious and circumspect. Consider whether what you want out of philosophy might not be

better pursued by refusing to turn the same way as everyone else. Consider, that is, becoming a counterrevolutionary.

Do not worry—you do not need dynamite. We will kill them with kindness, as my grandma used to say. If someone asks you, ‘What do you think makes morality normative?’, you can politely reply, ‘Oh, did you mean to ask me what I believe *justifies* the claim to special *authority*, often made on behalf of certain favored principles or ideals or values that are supposed to prescribe or direct how everyone should live?’. If someone insists, ‘But politics is normative!’, you might say, ‘Well, of course, most of us do think we have reason to recognize the government’s *authority* or the law’s *right* to *oblige* us insofar as some basic standard of *legitimacy* has been met—is that what you meant?’. If someone says ‘I’m puzzled about how epistemic normativity interacts with moral normativity’, you can offer ‘Oh, that’s neat; I’ve been wondering how considerations surrounding certain values like *loyalty* or *justice*, which some people evidently do treat as good grounds for believing certain things, could ever be squared with what seem like very strict rules requiring that one only take into account one’s *evidence* in forming one’s beliefs’.

You get the idea. These and many, many other claims and questions of long-standing interest to moral philosophers have all been translated into talk about ‘normativity’ in recent years. Quite imperfectly translated—garbled even—I would say. Why not just say them or ask them the original way, if you can, and then debate the answers? I defy anyone to give me an example of a philosophical question about our morals that does not become clearer when we force ourselves to ask it in a way that eschews all talk of ‘normativity’.

I suspect that when philosophers of the future—particularly those who are interested in morals—look back on our ‘normative turn’ they will, in the main, tend to see it as a period of rather underwhelming engagement with what were unusually turbulent and demanding times outside of philosophy. (And also, in a different though connected way, demanding and turbulent times for the profession’s own mores and politics).

One must tread lightly in saying this sort of thing. There is, after all, that peculiar form of narcissism that tempts us to see the times in which we live as unusually fraught. Still, the bulk of this essay was written amidst a global pandemic, amidst demonstrations in the streets, and amidst a response from both the political class and the polity itself that seems increasingly unimpressed by the traditional norms (whatever their ‘normative status’) of liberalism. So it is hard not to indulge.

Amidst pestilence, injustice, and strife, I think it is natural to want certain things from moral philosophy. At the very least, it would be nice to get a bit of help making sense of what seems quite senseless so that perhaps we could begin feeling our way toward some sort of reconciliation with it. Or maybe not reconciliation, but instead the basis of a more articulate reproach. Or maybe even an inspiring plan of action to begin to *do* something about it all. Really, what I want is a bit of all of these things, depending on the day.

Will our ‘normative turn’ help us to get these sorts of things from moral philosophy? Only time will tell, but you can guess by now where my money is. I conjecture that with the clarity of hindsight, it will come to seem a wrong turn,

supposing there are enough of us around looking back on it through philosophically keener, if wearier, eyes.

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