Truthless Expressive Obligating Oughts

Introduction

Normative statements are those that tell us what we *ought* to do. Statements like "Believe only what is true" and "Do not murder" are normative statements. What I take to be the *intuitive view* is that these statements express something about the way reality is. *Normative realism* would be an instance of the *intuitive view*. *Normative anti-realism* is the idea that normative statements do not express anything true at all. In this paper, my aim is motivating someone to anti-realism from an initially limited understanding of anti-realism. I will not be arguing that normative realism is wrong. I propose *normative realism* begins with mistaken presuppositions. I will explain that adopting an anti-realist view does not change our ability to assert such statements nor does it change anything else about disagreements about what statements we should commit to. I will also argue that *normative anti-realism* does not undermine itself by its foundational presupposition, "There are no true normative statements."

Background

Conflicting views of normative realism and anti-realism revolve around the nature of what normative statements are and what grounds them.

There are varieties of both normative realism and anti-realism as well as sorts of normative statements. I will be speaking generally. I will be concerned with moral normative statements like "Killing is wrong" or "Don't lie." I will also be concerned with epistemic normative statements

like "Believe only what is true" or "Believe only what is warranted." The former tells us what to do. The latter tells us how to acquire knowledge.

I will treat normative realism as the general idea that normative statements have properties like *being true* and *being good*. I take the view to also entail that normative statements express propositions and propositions are truth-bearing and what makes propositions true is how they relate to reality. Finally, I take that view to maintain it is a normative statement's *being true* or *being good* that warrants asserting such statements and why they are obliging.

I will treat normative anti-realism as the general idea that if normative statements have such properties as *being true* or *being good*, those properties either express propositions which cannot be said to be true or do not express anything in terms of the way reality is, in terms of truths or propositions.

I will try to emphasize *oughts* – the sense of obligation – as separate from normative statements in this paper. That is not because I think the two can or should be separated. But I do think the apprehension of anti-realist conceptions of normative statements is that normative statements convey a sense of obligation to act and that sense would come apart from normative statements if they were not true. If not true, then normative statements would not even be just reduced to other types of statements that tell us something about the way things are. They could not express anything but how we feel. In my talking about each as if they are separate in this paper, I will try to reason how the two actually do come together and hold that key relationship.

Roadmap

I will give a sketch of what I am calling the *intuitive view*. I will explain people tend to hold this view because normative statements need to be warranted and obliging. I will suggest that accounts of what properties normative statements might have are not sufficient for warrant and then not sufficient for obliging if warrant is the necessary condition of obligation. I will then motivate an anti-realist account sufficient for warrant, sufficient for obliging.

Why Normative Realism?

A natural impulse seems to me to be that when we assert a normative statement, we understand there is a burden that comes with it. I think that is for three reasons. First is simply that we want to be confident in what we believe and attest to. Second is a principle about motivation in that lacking good grounds for asserting leaves statements with no weight. There is seemingly no sense of duty or obligation if normative statements are not true in the sense of *being the case*. Third, even if we have grounds for asserting a normative statement, it may be disputed. When disputed, we have a discursive *burden of proof* that is only discharged by giving justification. I think understanding the weight that comes with making normative statements rightly comes the sense that warrant for them *ought* to be equally weighty. Truths – whatever they are supposed to be – are thought to be able to deliver those goods.

It does not seem like normative statements can be merely expressive and succeed in this way.

Why Not Normative Anti-realism?

When considering then that what we *ought* to do is entailed by normative statements, we might not be able to meet these principles while holding an anti-realist view. Moreover, it seems natural to think that the view that there are no true normative statements is self-defeating. In taking that view, we would not be able to motivate anyone to think there are grounds for anyone's taking that view. The self-defeat is not from asserting "There are no true normative statements," because epistemic statements like that one are not themselves normative statements. Defeat would come in the anti-realist asserting such a thing at all. That is, why assert anything if the assertion does not entail we *ought* to believe what is asserted?

So, without any deep understanding of normative statements at all, we are naturally inclined to think that normative statements like "Cheating is wrong" *is true* and "Cheating" *being wrong* is what *makes* "Cheating is wrong" *true*. In other words, truth and wrongness are properties those statements have. Those properties are what grant us the right to assert and commit to those statements. These natural inclinations are very hard to overcome especially given the sorts of concerns considered above.

What About Properties?

The normative realist presumes that such properties as *truth* and *goodness*, *falsity* and *wrongness* are objective. The anti-realist does not make such presumptions. So, if a normative statement's warrantability and obligations stem from these properties, then there *ought* to be a way of demonstrating their objectivity and in a non-question begging way.

It is in this central problem for the realist that I make my point.

If warrant is what implies the *goodness* and *wrongness* of normative statements and those properties are necessary to the additional properties of *truth* and *falsity*, then warrant *just is* what we mean by *truth* and *goodness*, *falsity* and *wrongness*. That, or warrant is the right to assert, commit, believe, deny, doubt, and so on. In other words, warrant itself is what *makes* normative statements assertable (Ayer, 1956). The additional step of having warrant also imply what other properties exist is a wasted step, a non-instrumental one.

So, this opens up to a bigger question. Can we ever know the truth of normative statements? If normative statements are *synthetically true* or *synthetically good*, then the presumption is they are so because of the way reality is. If normative statements are *analytically true or analytically good*, then they are so merely in virtue of their meanings. Here is an argument by G.E. Moore (Ridge, 2019) suggesting that normative statements *being true* or *being good* is an open question:

The Open Question Argument

1) Either "Is it true that X is good?" is an open question or a meaningless question. (Basic)

2) If 'good' is (*synthetically*) equal to the natural property N, then "Is it true that X is N?" is not a meaningless question. (Basic)

3) 'Good' is (*synthetically*) equal to the natural property N. (Basic)

4) **So, "Is it true that X is good?" is not a meaningless question. (MT 2, 3)**

5) **So, "Is it true that X is good?" is an open question. (MTP 1, 4)**

In other words, if *good* and *charitable* have the same meaning, then asking "Is it good to be charitable" would be as meaningless as asking, "Is giving to the poor charitable" (granting that

giving to the poor just is what *being charitable* means). The same is true if we were to assert "Being charitable is good" just in case what we meant by *good* was *being charitable*. It would be a tautology. So when we say something like "Abortion is wrong," we probably do not just mean that "Abortion is the termination of the life of the unborn." We mean something like "Abortion is the termination of the life of the unborn **and** the termination of the life of the unborn is wrong."

If something like goodness is an ever-open question, why suppose it exists?

It might be argued that there is a difference between a metaphysical fact of there being properties like truth and goodness and our epistemic ability to know such facts. If so, then yes, "Is abortion wrong?" is an open question, and one we can only imply is true by way of warrant. However, it would imply a concession to anti-realists who agree and then by virtue of that distinction assert that every normative statement is then false since the relevant truth-makers are beyond us. But even if not taken that far, this seems to lose footing because justification for normative statements would not be warranted by those properties. As an open question, normative statements are unanalyzable in terms of natural properties; we can always ask in an infinitely regressive way what makes normative statements true if it is natural properties "all the way down."[1]

Like the normative anti-realist, the realist would provide warrant for their assertions but without that warrant being in terms of any such properties as truth or goodness, which is really what is supposed to be motivating about realism.

Wrong and *termination of the life of the unborn* might be seen as an *extensional* definition of what *wrong* consists of rather than the *intentional* definition of objects that qualify as *being wrong* by some shared property those objects possess.

---

[1] The usual colloquialism being "turtles all the way down."

Is Normative Anti-realism Plausible?

The sum of my argument is just that if the truth and goodness of normative statements are open questions, then we do not appeal to those properties for warrant for claiming normative statements in fact possess those properties. So in that case, it does not make sense that such statements cache out in terms of their having those properties. It is then pragmatically senseless to have warrant for asserting that P while at the same time holding the view that asserting P also requires that (*really*) P, be that P's actually *being true* or P's actually *being good*.

If normative statements are not warranted by their *being true* or *being good*, then why should we believe *any* statement at all since we only believe them because we *ought* to believe what is true?

First, if a normative statement's appropriateness in asserting or believing is synonymous with reasonableness, then one who asserted "There are no true normative statements" might not undermine herself just in case that is what is appropriate to believe. That is, such an assertion can be made without logical contradiction and reasons exist that imply it is what we should commit to and the assertion is still aptly motivating. "Believe only what is true" might turn out to be an inappropriate epistemic norm. Normative anti-realism might then be *true* if what is meant by *true* is just that what it proposes is the most reasonable thing to believe alone or among alternative views.

Second, *any* statement can be true without requiring a substantive view of truth. We can certainly grant there *is* such a thing as truth as a property of propositions, but on the *standard view* we allow the belief in, and assertion of, justified falsehoods (Feldman, 2003) because we never can know better than what justification implies. In other words, granting such a thing as truth-as-substantive is epistemically fruitless, as if it does not pragmatically exist at all. We cannot appeal to some supposed property called *truth* when accounting for our use of the predicate *is true*. That is the

legacy of Gettier, I suppose. We might be better off admitting with Williams that we need a theory of justification, not truth (1986). Or something like Wellmer's sentiment (2003):

> ... we call "true" those assertions or convictions that we take to be justified: taking-to-be-true is a taking-a-position in a social space of reasons and not the ascription of a mysterious property.

It does not seem necessary that we adopt some additive account of alethiology when what gives us the right to assert something like "There are no true normative statements" are the reasons for our wanting to assert "[It is true that] There are no true normative statements" (The anti-realist translation being: "There are no good reasons for taking up any position such that we would use the word 'true' substantively regarding normative statements").

"Is that true," asks the realist? "It is the most justified commitment to make," answers the anti-realist. So while it is clear this might be a case of irreconcilable differences, what is not clear is that anti-realism undermines itself. It is neither inconsistent in what it is claiming nor is it inconsistent within its own paradigm of language and its use of its notion of truth. Realist complaints may turn out to be failures of one language speaker to appreciate some other language, like balking that if the Spanish word "Hola" meant "Hello," then it would only be so if "Hola" was an English word. In making the claim "There are no true normative statements", the anti-realist is making a claim about the realist conception of truth. The realist begs the question if she does not evaluate the basis of the claim in anti-realist conceptions of truth.

To clear it up in a Tarskian way, "There are true normative statements" is realist object language evaluated in the meta-language of anti-realism as such: "[Not warranted:] There are true normative statements."

The realist undermining claim looks like "*true in language L*" is not something recalled and brought to bear or is being rejected.

It seems sufficient to our everyday understanding of truth that it is primitive to representational beings like us where justification is the only sort of account of truth that is instrumentally required in human discourse.

Third is that the *ought* of normative language can be compelling by virtue of our being human, sharing a commonality that makes a difference to the reasons we form dispositions to believe, doubt, disbelieve, deny, to feel burdens, obligations and duties, and so on. I am skeptical that what we convey in normative statements are truths or duties or obligations but that the act itself is an attempt, by whatever means we think might obtain our perlocutionary effect, to get others to feel like we do about some subject. In so feeling, so would go our thinking like others as well, at least in terms of what reasons might help us "[take up some position] in a social space of reasons."

Grant for a moment that people are generally and relevantly the same when it comes to the ways in which people reason and the way people generally feel about situations given similar backgrounds and circumstances. This would at least entail the possibility of an epistemically objective basis for the scaffolding of any normative statements one might utter in any given context. Others have argued the point but I will not take the time here. Again, grant it.

Intersubjective agreement is roughly the sort of agreement people can have over subjective matters such as shared meanings in things we say or collective judgments about our individual experiences. For instance, we seem to intersubjectively agree that some movies are very much better than others and some, very much poorer. We can even set out principles which capture features all better and

poorer movies seem to possess. Such agreements are not about facts about any particular movie. They are about our shared sentiments about movies in general.

In that way then, intersubjective agreements would be sufficient for epistemically grounding ethical obligations whether individually internal, informally and socially, or formally through law. Our common ground of being human in a particular way and among similar situatedness gives us a way to relate normative statements to feelings of obligation, and such that no normative statement need to be taken as objectively true or objectively good.

It is often argued that common ground is requisite to any agreement and especially disagreement over what to do or believe (e.g. Rorty, 2003; Ichikawa, 2020). Truth alone does not seem to underwrite statements, in that case. It seems once again that intersubjective agreement does. When we grant common ground as the necessary backdrop of any occasion to make statements in some context, then it seems (to me) immediately obvious that all parties of a dialogue, having the very same relevant interests in the subject at hand, makes such statements *naturally compelling*.

If we then have two differing accounts of normative statements and both can motivate and underwrite the duties, obligations, and imperative nature of such statements in an objective[2] way, then we may simply need to have some way of interpreting statements, evaluated as "*true in language L*". If Stephanie and Janet are both realists, we can imagine how an anti-realist (e.g. an expressivist) might interpret them.

> Stephanie: Abortion is wrong. [If I were you, I would not have anything to do with abortion.]

---

[2] Whether ontologically or epistemically objective, i.e. in a mind-independent way or relative to our standards of coming to knowledge.

Janet: There is nothing wrong about abortion, Stephanie. [I am not you though, and I don't agree.]

Stephanie, Janet, myself, and the rest of us might have very different theories about what makes normative statements compelling or obligatory, but it does seem that irrespective of the realist account, we are all just left to a sea of reasons that may always repair any dividing common ground among us.

And where such common ground does not exist, we find no ties to what is true or wrong or right or any other empirical appeal strong enough or apt enough to bridge any divide much less fill it. In that case, we need theories of warrant and obligation and sentiment. Normative anti-realist theories would have our time better spent on notions of warrant. Psychology as well as linguistics might then also be more fruitful than being locked in a search for some *real* grounding of normative statements.

CITED WORKS

Ayer, A.J. (1956). *The Problem Of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan.

Cahn, S. M., & Markie, P. J. (1998*). Ethics: History, Theory, And Contemporary Issues*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ichikawa, J. J. (2020). *Faith And Epistemology*. Episteme, 17(1), 121-140.

Feldman, R. (2003). *Epistemology*. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice Hall.

Ridge, M. (2019, August 21). *Moral Non-naturalism*. Stanford Encyclopedia Of Philosophy. Retrieved September 18, 2021, from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-non-naturalism/#OpeQueArg.

Rorty, R. (1992). 1999. *Trotsky And The Wild* Orchids. Philosophy And Social Hope (pp. 3-22).

Wellmer, A. (2003). *The Debate About Truth: Pragmatism Without Regulative Ideas*. Critical Horizons, 4(1), 29-54.

Williams, M. (1986). *Do We (Epistemologists) Need A Theory Of Truth?*. Philosophical Topics, 14(1), 223-242.