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James L. D. Brown

Published online: 16 Aug 2023.

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On Scepticism About Ought *Simpliciter*

James L. D. Brown 🆔

University of Sheffield

ABSTRACT
Scepticism about ought *simpliciter* is the view that there is no such thing as what one ought *simpliciter* to do. Instead, practical deliberation is governed by a plurality of normative standpoints, each authoritative from their own perspective but none authoritative *simpliciter*. This paper aims to resist such scepticism. After setting out the challenge in general terms, I argue that scepticism can be resisted by rejecting a key assumption in the sceptic's argument. This is the assumption that standpoint-relative ought judgments bring with them a commitment to act in accordance with those judgments. Instead, I propose an alternative account of our normative concepts according to which only ought *simpliciter* judgments commit one to acting in accordance with those judgments. In addition to answering the sceptical challenge, the proposal offers an independently motivated account of what makes a concept normatively authoritative.

1. Introduction

Our lived normative experience is often one of conflict. As rational agents, we aspire to act as we judge that we ought to act. But the values and considerations we respond to in so judging often pull us in opposite directions. In the face of such conflict, how should we respond? A natural thought is that we work out what we *overall* ought to do by considering all of the normatively relevant features of the situation and determining their overall relative importance. When things go well, this judgment then settles what *to* do. Thus, at least some of the time, the conflict is resolved.

While many see this as a natural picture of practical reason, others are sceptical. The sceptics claim that the clash of different values and considerations is not something that calls for normative resolution. Rather, it reflects the deeply disunified nature of practical reason. More specifically, the idea is that there is a plurality of distinct normative 'standpoints', each with its own answer about what one ought to do in any situation. While we can *treat* any such standpoint as authoritative in practical deliberation, there is no fact of the matter about what one *just plain* ought to do, or what one ought to do *simpliciter*. This is because, the sceptics argue, the very notion of an overarching

standpoint that authoritatively settles what to do is incoherent, lacks definite sense, or has implausible normative consequences.

Which is the correct picture of practical reason? The question is interesting in its own right. But how we answer the question also has significant practical and theoretical implications. For instance, when we deliberate about what to do, we typically care about getting things right. And while there are many ways in which one can fail to get things right on the sceptic's view, one cannot fail to act according to what matters most overall. For according to the sceptic's view, there is no such thing. Further, although much has been written on the structure of practical reason, the meta-normative implications of this debate have been underappreciated. For instance, each view will have different implications regarding how we should understand different kinds of normative judgments and their relations to one another.

The aim of this paper is to defend the unified view of practical reason. Scepticism about unity is motivated by apparent cases of normative conflict where different normative standpoints recommend conflicting actions in the same situation. I argue that the proponent of unity can argue that those cases are just that—apparent. For the proponent of unity can reject the sceptic's assumption that standpoint-relative ought judgments bring with them a commitment to act in accordance with those judgments. Without this assumption, the sceptic fails to specify any genuine conflict that could undermine the unified view. Further, drawing on conceptual role accounts of normative concepts, I offer an independently motivated account of our normative concepts that explains why only certain ought judgments bring with them a commitment to act in accordance with those judgments. Thus, as well resisting scepticism about unity, the paper provides an account of what makes certain concepts *authoritatively* normative.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I outline the case against the unified view (§2). Second, I highlight a core assumption in the sceptic's argument and show how scepticism can be resisted by rejecting this assumption (§3). Third, I argue that sceptics offer no compelling reason to accept the assumption (§4).

2. Scepticism About Unity

My aim is to defend what I have called the unified view of practical reason, or more simply, *unity*. So let me begin by saying more precisely what this is. To describe practical reason as unified in the sense relevant to our discussion is to say that practical deliberation is governed by an authoritative unitary standard. In any situation, this standard determines facts about what one ought to do, where these facts normatively settle the question of what *to* do.

The sense of 'ought' employed here has been given many names: the *overall* ought; the *practical* ought; ought *all-things-considered*; *just plain* ought; the *free floating and unsubscripted* ought; the *deliberative* ought; ought *simpliciter*; and so on.[1] While none of these names is entirely satisfactory, I will hereafter talk in terms of 'ought *simpliciter*' in line with those I will be discussing below. It is important, however, to remember that these are just names for the relevant sense of 'ought' rather than characterizations. For instance, the debate about unity is sometimes characterized in terms of whether there

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[1] While ordinary language seems to lack a name for this concept, Ridge (2014: 20) points out that we more ordinarily talk of what we *really*, *truly*, or *genuinely* ought to do. See Wodak 2019: 830–32, for discussion.

is an 'ought' that is not relativized to any normative standpoint (Tiffany 2007; Copp 2021). While this is naturally suggested by talk of ought *simpliciter*, the unified view need not deny that the truth-conditions of ought *simpliciter* claims are relativized to a normative standard. This is implausible anyway given the standard semantics for 'ought' (see Chrisman 2016). The important point, rather, is that the standard picked out by 'ought *simpliciter*' authoritatively governs practical deliberation.[2] Thus, scepticism about unity is scepticism about ought *simpliciter*.

The case against unity typically proceeds in two steps (most prominently, see Copp 2007; Tiffany 2007; Baker 2018). The first step motivates the idea that practical deliberation is governed by a plurality of distinct normative standpoints. This is done by reflecting on cases of normative conflict, or 'conflict situations'. The second step argues that in conflict situations, there are no facts about what one ought *simpliciter* to do. Specifically, it is argued that the notion of ought *simpliciter* is incoherent, lacks sense, or has implausible normative commitments.

Although it is not always made explicit, it is worth highlighting that these two steps of the argument are distinct. After all, one might accept the first step without accepting the second by maintaining that although practical deliberation is governed by a plurality of distinct standpoints, there is a uniquely privileged standpoint that adjudicates between those other standpoints (compare Killoren 2019). Although there is a clear sense in which this view can be described as a pluralist view of practical normativity, for the purposes of this paper I will classify it as an instance of the unified view. What matters for our purposes is whether practical deliberation is settled by what one ought *simpliciter* to do. But distinguishing each step of the argument is important because it suggests two different argumentative strategies for defending the unified view. Whereas most critical discussion has focused on the second step, I will argue below that the proponent of unity should reject the first step of the argument. First, however, the argument.

2.1 Step One

Step one of the sceptic's argument aims to establish that practical deliberation is governed by a plurality of distinct standpoints. This view is motivated by reflecting on conflict situations. For instance, Copp (2007) asks us to consider the mythical Gyges who devises a plan to become the King of Lydia by assassinating the current King and then marrying the Queen. The risk to Gyges in carrying out his plan is small. After all, he has a magic ring that makes him invisible. And he has a lot to gain if he succeeds. For, we can stipulate, he will live a life full of pleasure, achievement, value fulfilment, and so on. Clearly, however, on any plausible conception of morality, Gyges ought not to go through with his plan. However good the outcome might be *for Gyges*, it is morally impermissible to murder someone to achieve this outcome. As Copp sees it, Gyges is presented with a practical conflict arising from the conflicting demands of two distinct normative standpoints. From the standpoint of self-interest or prudence, Gyges should murder the King. From the standpoint of morality, Gyges should not murder the King.

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[2] For this reason, arguments that challenge the coherence of an un-relativized 'ought' (e.g., Copp 2021: 422–24) should not pose a serious threat to the unified view.

Lest this example seem somewhat recherché, consider another.[3] I am at a family dinner when a relative makes an inappropriate comment. While there was no malicious intent behind the comment, it expresses a harmful and derogatory attitude. It is important not to normalize or reinforce such attitudes, so I plausibly have an obligation to say something. However, my relative is sensitive about being challenged in this way and saying something is bound to ruin the otherwise agreeable atmosphere. Besides, doing so would be awkward for me, and more so for the host, for whom I know it is important that this dinner goes well. As before, we can suppose that the details of this example are such that I morally ought to say something while I prudentially ought to say nothing. So again, we might interpret such conflict in terms of distinct normative standpoints providing me with conflicting demands about what to do. For simplicity, I will focus on examples where the intuitive conflict is between morality and prudence. But we might suppose that there are other normatively relevant standpoints in play. For instance, we might suppose that my relation to the host provides me with a decisive non-moral, interpersonal reason to say nothing.[4]

Our interpretation of any putative conflict situation will involve making first-order judgments about how the situation is to be evaluated from different standpoints. Such judgments are bound to be contentious. Thus, perhaps in the two situations described above, there really is no conflict between morality and prudence. How we fill in the details matters, but if the reader is not convinced by the above examples, I invite them to construct their own. At the very least, the claim that distinct normative standpoints *never* offer conflicting recommendations seems highly controversial.[5] Plausibly, then, the burden of proof lies with those who wish to reject the possibility of conflict cases.

A number of important questions remain unanswered regarding the sceptic's account of conflict situations. For instance, what exactly are normative standpoints? How are they individuated? Is there any distinction between standpoints that are authoritatively normative and those that are merely formally normative? Pluralists disagree about how to answer these questions. This results in substantive differences between different pluralist views.[6] However, these differences will not be important for what follows. What matters for step one of the sceptic's argument is that the existence of conflict situations shows that practical deliberation is governed by a plurality of normative standpoints.

2.2 Step Two

Step two of the sceptic's argument aims to show that conflict situations cannot be resolved by appealing to the standpoint of ought *simpliciter*. I examine the two most influential versions of this argument from Copp (2007) and Baker (2018).[7]

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[3] For further examples, see Tiffany 2007, Baker 2018, and Copp 2021.
[4] Compare Wolf 2015 and Cocking and Kennett 2000.
[5] But see Harman 2021 for dissent.
[6] Taking each question in turn, talk of (say) *the moral standpoint* might mean how things are according to morality, or it might be understood as a psychological perspective we inhabit when we engage in moral deliberation (compare Killoren 2019: 147). Second, Copp (2009) individuates normative standpoints by the role they play in ameliorating problems of normative governance, whereas Tiffany (2007) and Baker (2018) offer a deflationary pluralism in which we can individuate normative standpoints more or less however we like. Third, Copp (2007) maintains a distinction between standpoints that intuitively matter and those that do not, for which he provides principled criteria (Copp 2009); by contrast Tiffany (2007) and Baker (2018) maintain that all standpoints are equal in providing reasons that are authoritative from their own perspective but not from others.

To illustrate Copp's argument, recall the case of Gyges. We supposed that Gyges (a) morally ought to not kill the King but (b) prudentially ought to kill the King. Suppose that now we posit some further standpoint that adjudicates between morality and prudence. Call that standpoint S. In order for S to play this adjudicating role, it must be the case that S has greater normative authority than morality, prudence, or any other standpoint. However, that S has this property is a normative claim which must be made from some standpoint or other. Call this standpoint R. Now, either R is identical to S or it is not. Suppose that R is identical to S. This means that S explains its own authority. However, because other standpoints display this kind of self-endorsement, this alone cannot explain its authority.[8] Next, suppose that R is not identical to S. If R settles what standpoint to follow, then R must have greater normative authority than S. However, this contradicts our initial assumption that S is supremely authoritative. Thus, Copp concludes that there is nothing that can satisfy the concept of ought *simpliciter*.

Some question whether the second horn of the dilemma really involves any contradiction. Whereas S concerns how we should *act*, R concerns how we justify S *itself*. So it is not clear that this contradicts the initial assumption that S authoritatively justifies action (McLeod 2001: 286–87). This point notwithstanding, however, the argument still gives rise to a regress (Copp 2007: 303; Dorsey 2013: 130–31). For what explains the authority of R in settling which standard of deliberation to follow? Again, it cannot simply explain its own authority. We instead must appeal to some further standpoint, whose relative authority must also be explained—and so on for infinitely many standpoints. Is the regress vicious? While Dorsey describes the regress as 'problematic in the extreme' (2013: 131), Killoren (2019) argues that it need not be vicious at all. A challenge for any such 'infinitist' view is to explain how the authority of S can be grounded if there are no ultimate grounds of justification (Copp 2021: n.25). At the very least, we are left with a surprising and unparsimonious view of the structure of normative reality.

Baker's argument against unity takes a slightly different form. He begins by noting that if introducing a further 'ought' is to resolve rather than create further conflict, it must be the case that its prescriptions 'trump other prescriptions', are 'overriding', 'have greater normative authority', tell you 'what you *really* ought to do', are '*robustly* or *genuinely* normative', or have greater 'normative *force*' (2018: 234). These are among the many expressions that philosophers appeal to in order to explain ought *simpliciter*. However, according to Baker, such talk is objectionably metaphorical or 'otherwise hopelessly vague and ambiguous' (2018: 235). To vindicate ought *simpliciter*, Baker claims, we need to precisify its content to make its sense determinate and clear. But, he argues, none of the obvious candidates succeed in this task. Accordingly, this is a concept we can and should do without.[9]

Baker examines a number of precisifications of ought *simpliciter*, arguing against each in turn. For reasons of space, I cannot rehearse the details of these arguments here (though we will examine one such argument below in §4.2). But his general argument can be put in the form of a dilemma. On the one horn, the authority of ought

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[7] While Tiffany (2007) is a prominent sceptic of unity, he does not argue directly against unity. Rather, he argues that pluralism provides the best explanation of conflict situations. I examine his argument in §4.1.

[8] But see Shafer 2016 for the view that morality might not recommend itself as a guide to practical reason.

[9] Although one might complain that the concept of a normative standpoint is no less metaphorical or ambiguous.

simpliciter is explained in normative terms. However, any such attempt will inevitably make use of the initial metaphor that we are trying to explain. On the other horn, the authority of ought *simpliciter* is explained non-normatively, for example, in terms of its being psychologically overriding. However, if resolving normative conflict is simply a psychological matter, then there is no need to postulate an overarching normative standpoint in the first place (Baker 2018: 242–43). All we need is some kind of causally action-guiding ought, and there is no reason to describe this ought in terms of authority. So neither approach will do.

Thus, we have two argumentative strategies for rejecting the unity of practical reason based on an interpretation of conflict situations according to which they are governed by distinct and conflicting normative standpoints. A possible response to both arguments might be that the authority of ought *simpliciter* is primitive and admits of no explanation (McLeod 2001: 286). This would seem to undermine Copp's argument, as there would be no requirement for the authority of *S* to be explained by *R*. It would also seem to undermine Baker's argument, as there would be no requirement to provide a precisification of authority in other terms. However, the plausibility of this response might depend on one's other meta-normative commitments, such as whether one accepts naturalism or non-naturalism about the normative domain (Baker 2018: 233–34; McPherson 2018: 258–59). Other things being equal, it would be preferable if the proponent of unity had *something* to say by way of explanation of the authority of ought *simpliciter*. So let's see what can be said.

3. Resisting the Sceptical Argument

In this section, I highlight a key assumption implicit in the sceptic's argument and argue that the unity of practical reason can be defended by rejecting this assumption (§3.1). I then propose a positive account of ought *simpliciter* that rejects this assumption (§3.2). Finally, I show how the account can be extended to other putatively authoritative oughts (§3.3).

3.1 The Key Assumption

Recall, again, the story of Gyges. We have been describing this as a conflict situation. But it is worth asking exactly wherein lies the conflict. We were supposing that Gyges (a) morally ought to not kill the King but (b) prudentially ought to kill the King. Given that morality and prudence are distinct normative standpoints characterized by distinct standards, and each instance of 'ought' is relativized to those respective standards, there is no *alethic* inconsistency between (a) and (b). Thus, both can be true, so there is no conflict in *judging* both (a) and (b). The conflict, rather, seems to be *practical*. Gyges cannot both kill the King and not kill the king. But the normative facts seem to commit Gyges to both courses of action. Hence, Gyges' situation is one of conflict—or so the sceptic must assume. For without this assumption, or something like it, the sceptic fails to specify any sense in which conflict situations involve genuine normative conflict.

I say 'something like it' because although the sceptics I discuss assume that different normative standpoints commit one to *acting* in conflicting ways, all they need is to assume that they commit one to some sort of conflicting *response*, which may or may not be an action. For instance, it might be that different normative standpoints conflict in virtue of committing one to having incoherent *attitudes*, such as intentions,

emotions, and so on. Notice, moreover, that this assumption generalizes to other evaluative and normative notions besides ought. For suppose the sceptic maintains that conflict situations are characterized by distinct normative standpoints issuing divergent verdicts about what is good or what reasons there are. Since the normative facts themselves are not in conflict, the conflict must be located in the response that these facts call for. But if the rational agent displays no inconsistency or incoherence in responding to these facts, then there is no sense in which the situation involves a genuine normative conflict. For simplicity, however, I will continue to assume that the relevant conflict is a practical conflict issuing from divergent ought judgments.

One way in which the proponent of unity can challenge the sceptic's argument is thus to deny the assumption that judgments about what one morally or prudentially ought to do entail a commitment to act according to those judgments. Instead, they can argue that only judgments about what one ought *simpliciter* to do entail a commitment to act according to those judgments. On this way of viewing things, practical deliberation is not governed by a plurality of distinct normative standpoints. Rather, practical deliberation is governed by a single normative standpoint—that of what one ought *simpliciter* to do. If this is right, then there is no demand to explain how ought *simpliciter* could have authority over other standpoints. For on this view, judgments concerning this and only this standpoint have the action-guiding role necessary to engender genuine normative conflict.[10]

There are several ways in which to flesh out this basic idea. I propose one such way below (§3.2). But it is first worth re-examining the structure of conflict situations once we reject the sceptic's key assumption. Suppose that (a) one morally ought to do *A* but (b) prudentially ought to do *B*, where *A* and *B* are incompatible actions. As we saw above, these claims can simultaneously be true, so there is no conflict in judging both (a) and (b). Moreover, if we deny that moral or prudential ought judgments commit one to acting in accordance with those judgments, then judging both (a) and (b) will not engender any practical conflict. Hence, we have not yet described a situation in which there is any genuine conflict.

Now, I began this paper by stating that our lived normative experience is characterized by conflict. We *feel* the conflicting pressures of different values and considerations. So it won't do to simply deny the existence of such conflict. It needs to be explained. However, there are many ways of explaining this feature of normative experience that are compatible with the unified view. The first thing to note is that, plausibly, if one morally ought to do *A*, then one has a reason *simpliciter* to do *A*. Similarly, it is plausible that if one prudentially ought to do *B*, then one has a reason *simpliciter* to do *B*. If our judgments about what we have reason *simpliciter* to do can give rise to practical conflicts, then given these assumptions, many situations will feature this kind of felt conflict, where different sets of considerations pull us in different directions.

However, these kinds of conflicts do not support scepticism about unity. This is because the conflict arises from *within* a single normative standpoint. Depending on the details of the case, the conflict might be characterized in different ways. For instance, if the considerations in favour of *A* are stronger or more important than

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[10] Compare Dorsey (2013), who defends unity by claiming that the standpoint of ought *simpliciter* is the only authoritative standpoint. However, whereas Dorsey simply *stipulates* this in order to reject scepticism, the account proposed below aims to provide an *explanation* of this fact that is independently motivated. I discuss some further differences to Dorsey's account below (§3.3).

those in favour of *B* (or vice versa), then the conflict will be straightforwardly resolved. However, it might be that neither set of considerations outweighs the other. For instance, the two sets of considerations might be equal in weight, on a par, incommensurable or incomparable, or merely permissibility conferring. In some cases, it will be permissible to choose either *A* or *B*, meaning that there is no genuine conflict. However, it may also be that in some cases we are presented with a genuine practical dilemma where we ought *simpliciter* to do *A* and ought *simpliciter* to do *B*. But even in such cases, the practical dilemma arises within the standpoint of what one ought *simpliciter* to do. Accepting the existence of genuine normative conflict on this view does not in any way support pluralism.

Many details remain to be filled in, but what this shows is that there is an interpretation of conflict situations according to which putative conflicts arise from within a single normative standpoint rather than between distinct normative standpoints. In many cases, what we experience as conflict will turn out not to be cases of genuine normative conflict. However, there may also be cases of genuine normative conflict.[11] If this is the correct way of conceiving of conflict situations, then the first step of the sceptic's argument is undermined. This immediately raises two questions. First, does the sceptic offer any compelling reason for their preferred interpretation of conflict situations? Second, is our alternative interpretation defendable on its own terms? In the remainder of this section, I answer the second question in the affirmative. This will then provide us with the resources to answer the first question in the negative (§4).

3.2 The Authority of Ought Simpliciter Explained

The claim to be defended is that only judgments about what one ought *simpliciter* to do commit one to acting in accordance with those judgments. I think that the best defence of this claim will be grounded in a story about the nature of our normative concepts. Specifically, the idea is that our concept of ought *simpliciter* essentially has the functional or conceptual role of non-arbitrarily settling what to do in practical deliberation, and that no other kind of ought essentially has this role. For instance, McPherson (2018) argues that our concept of ought *simpliciter* just is that concept we use to non-arbitrarily select an option in practical deliberation. This is what the concept is *for*. Thus, on this view, to make a judgment with the aim of non-arbitrarily selecting an action just is to make a judgment about what one ought *simpliciter* to do. By contrast, other kinds of ought that we might employ in practical reasoning do not have this role.

So far, this is just a psychological story about our concepts. However, given plausible assumptions about reference fixing or content determination, this story provides us with the resources to explain why, given these assumptions, only ought *simpliciter* judgments are concerned with the justification of action as such. Specifically, the idea is that the content or subject matter of a concept is fixed by its functional or conceptual role. If the unique functional or conceptual role of ought *simpliciter* is to take us from judgments of the form that one ought to do *A* in *C* to intending to do *A* in *C*, then the subject matter of ought *simpliciter* is whatever it is that makes it appropriate to (intend to) do *A* in *C*. It has this as its content and not something else because this assignment

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[11] This is a central theme of Nussbaum 1986.

best rationalizes or makes sense of why we have a concept with that functional or conceptual role.[12]

By contrast, if other kinds of ought judgments lack this conceptual role, then the subject matter of such judgments will not be the justification of action as such. Exactly how we do understand the content of other kinds of ought judgments will depend on the nature of the concept in question. Generally, however, what this shows is that although it is perfectly harmless to talk about morality or prudence or whatever 'recommending' or 'requiring' some action, we should not take for granted what such talk amounts to. Specifically, we should not assume that any standpoint-relative ought claim concerns the kind of justification we are concerned with in practical deliberation. If the content of these claims is determined by the conceptual roles of the concepts involved, and the conceptual roles of other flavours of 'ought' are not suitably action-guiding, then they will fail to determine contents that are authoritatively normative for action. Importantly, the notion of authoritative normativity here is not metaphorical, vague, ambiguous, or circular. It is defined in terms of the distinctive kind of justification constitutively involved in processes of practical deliberation.

To be sure, this is not a fully general response to scepticism about the unity of practical reason. First, the response assumes a kind of internalism about ought *simpliciter* judgments that some might wish to reject. Second, the response depends on a certain meta-semantic view of content determination. However, I think that both commitments are plausible, at least for the concept of ought *simpliciter*. And the view sketched here is compatible with a variety of meta-normative views. For instance, it is compatible with both naturalist and non-naturalist versions of meta-normative realism, as well as meta-normative expressivism and inferentialism.[13] So while it is not a comprehensive response, I think that it is one that many would find independently attractive. At the very least, the above account provides a possibility proof of providing a coherent, non-circular, and non-metaphorical way of explaining ought *simpliciter*. Given that sceptics like Copp and Baker deny even this possibility, we have made genuine progress in responding to scepticism about ought *simpliciter*.

3.3 Morality and Practical Reason

Some readers may have the following worry: Isn't the moral ought a paradigmatically *normative* concept, one that motivates and guides our actions in practical deliberation? Isn't it, in Copp's words, 'action-guiding or normative in a familiar sense' (2007: 284)? And doesn't our account deny this, in so far as it says that only ought *simpliciter* has the relevant action-guiding role? Similarly, is the same not true of the prudential ought? More generally, how should we understand the relation between ought *simpliciter* and domains like morality and prudence?

Focusing on morality, in the remainder of this section I examine two general ways of understanding this relationship. According to the first, morality is a domain of practical normativity distinct from practical reason proper. According to the second, morality is a subdomain of practical reason. I argue that the second view is preferable because it better explains why the moral ought is a paradigmatically normative

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[12] For more details, see Wedgwood 2007, Williams 2018, Sud 2019, and Brown 2022.
[13] For an expressivist view roughly along these lines, see Gibbard 1990; for a realist view, see Wedgwood 2007.

concept. Some might worry that even this much is too concessive. For some proponents of unity may simply deny the existence of a distinctively moral ought, or more generally deny that practical reason is constituted by distinctive subdomains. If such scepticism is warranted, then the above worry rests on a false assumption. While I am less sceptical, my argument here can be read conditionally: even if we grant the assumption that there is a distinctively moral ought, the unified view has the resources to explain it. But if the assumption is false, so much the better for the unified view.

According to the first way of understanding the relationship between morality and practical reason, the two standpoints are *distinct* in the sense that moral reasons are not a species of practical reason. This approach is taken by Dorsey (2013) in his defence of the unity of practical reason. Now, we often take moral reasons to be decisive or at least relevant in practical deliberation, so this approach owes us an explanation of this fact. Dorsey (2013: 137) proposes that morality is normative because we have reason *simpliciter* to follow morality. Thus, whereas ought *simpliciter* is *independently* normative, morality is *derivatively* normative. In this way, normative standpoints can inherit their normativity from practical reason proper while remaining distinct from it.

However, this view runs into trouble when we ask what it is that makes morality distinctive, or what the content of morality is. If morality is only derivatively normative—if it is distinct and disjoint from practical reason proper—then we must be able to answer these questions without reference to practical reason. Given our account of practical reason, this means that we must be able to give an account of morality that makes no reference to its action-guiding and justificatory role in practical deliberation. However, the worry raised at the beginning of this section was premised on the idea that the moral ought is the paradigm of a concept that has this role in practical deliberation. And arguably, we cannot explain the content of morality without specifying its practical role within our lives. As Stroud notes, 'it is not clear that we would even recognize as a *morality* a system which was taught, represented, and understood as "ignorable"' in one's practical deliberation (1998: 176). However, if morality is distinct from practical reason, then in principle it could be ignorable, even if as a first-order fact of practical reason we always have reason to act morally.[14]

These considerations suggest another way of understanding the relation between morality and practical reason. According to this second way, morality is not separate from practical reason. Rather, it is a *part* of practical reason. On this view, moral reasons are not distinct in kind from practical reasons. Rather, moral reasons are a *species* of practical reason. Specifically, moral reasons are the subclass of practical reasons concerned with distinctively moral concerns, whatever exactly those are.[15] Following a suggestion from Baker (2018: 238), we can then say that moral ought judgments are about what *would* be the case that you ought *simpliciter* to do, *if only moral considerations were in play*.[16]

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[14] Elsewhere, Dorsey argues that 'whether a considered judgment has moral content or not should be determined by its capacity to survive whatever proper epistemic procedure is appropriate for first-order moral inquiry' (2016: 772). However, this has the absurd consequence that false moral judgment is impossible.
[15] Some possible candidates: perhaps morality is concerned with when to feel guilt and anger (Gibbard 1990), with a distinctive kind of *interpersonal accountability* (Darwall 2013), or with *impersonal* practical reasons for action (Crisp 1996).
[16] Baker attributes the suggestion to Tristram McPherson and Michael Smith. But the basic idea can be found at least as far back as Williams 1985: 6. I respond to Baker's criticisms of this proposal below (§4.2). Compare also Harman 2021.

If morality is explained in terms of practical reason, then we face no worry about how to explain the content of morality independently of its practical role. Nonetheless, this approach still rejects the key assumption in the sceptic's argument. This is because the moral ought will only issue in an intention to act in conjunction with the belief that only moral considerations are in play. Given our assumptions about content determination, the facts about what one morally ought to do will not concern the justification of action *as such*. Thus, the moral ought is not directly action-guiding in the way the sceptic's argument requires.[17]

If the foregoing is correct, the proponent of unity should conceive of morality as part of practical reason and not distinct from it. I think that similar considerations will apply to other normative standpoints, such as prudence. Again, however, the important point here is simply that *if* some flavour of ought seems paradigmatically normative and cannot be explained apart from its role in practical deliberation, the unified view can explain that species of ought by reference to ought *simpliciter*. If the moral ought is such a concept, then it provides no problem for the unified view.

4. Two Objections

Let me sum up my argument so far. I began by highlighting an assumption in the sceptic's argument that different kinds of normative ought claims must be suitably action-guiding if they are to engender conflict. Without this assumption, or something like it, the sceptic fails to locate any genuine conflict in conflict situations. I then proposed an alternative interpretation of the structure of conflict situations that denies this assumption. According to this alternative interpretation, conflict situations are governed by a single normative standpoint, and putative conflicts arise within this standpoint. As such, this alternative interpretation cannot be used to support scepticism about unity. I then asked whether this proposal could be defended on its own terms. I suggested that it could by developing an account of ought *simpliciter* that is uniquely action-guiding in the relevant sense. In this section, I examine whether sceptics offer any compelling reason to prefer their interpretation of conflict situations, according to which they are governed by competing normative standpoints. I argue that they do not.

4.1 Taking Our Practices at Face Value

One motivation offered by pluralists for their interpretation of conflict situations is that it takes our justificatory practices at face value (Tiffany 2007). The thought seems to be this. At least on the face of it, our reasons do not seem to stem from a

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[17] An anonymous reviewer worries that once we follow Baker's suggestion, it becomes unclear why we should care so much about moral judgments, since the condition will almost always be false. It seems to me that the force of the worry depends on how we unpack the notion of 'moral considerations'. The account offered here is neutral with respect to the nature of moral considerations. But it seems plausible that moral considerations, whatever they are, hold a distinctive importance for us. For instance, consider Strawson's (1962) suggestion that we cannot enter into engaged interpersonal relationships without holding each other accountable in a way that requires the employment of certain concepts relating to moral responsibility. If morality is in some way distinctively important to us, then we might have a number of reasons to deliberate about morality abstracted from other practical concerns. Further, if one thinks that moral reasons are often or always overriding, as many do, then moral considerations will be especially important.

single source. In justifying our actions, we sometimes cite our desires, our projects, the law, social conventions, aesthetic norms, not to mention morality and prudence (Tiffany 2007: 234–39). Thus, on the face of it, it seems that these reasons lack a unified foundation. Other things being equal, we should seek an account that can make sense of our ordinary practices at face value.

However, the unified view is compatible with denying that our reasons have a unified foundation. According to Tiffany:

> Part of what is involved in claiming that there are a variety of *sources* of contributory reasons is that, strictly speaking, there isn't a relation of just plain, unqualified favouring and thus no such thing as (contributory) reasons-simpliciter. Rather, there are only moral (contributory) reasons, prudential reasons, legal reasons, and so on. (2007: 239)

But, *pace* Tiffany, there is no entailment from there being a plurality of *sources* of practical reasons to there being a plurality of *reason relations*. Or in so far as we can construct a plurality of favouring relations, each can be constructed from within the unified view in the way suggested in the previous section. Thus, it does not follow from the fact that two practical reasons have different sources that they are different kinds of reason.

To see why, suppose that morality is an independent standpoint. Specifically, suppose that it is that standpoint characterized by the correct first-order moral theory. A candidate for this theory might be some kind of moral pluralism, according to which we have a plurality of moral duties that are quite differently grounded. For instance, suppose that (a) I have specific duties to individuals in virtue of my special relationship to those individuals, (b) I have a general duty of beneficence not grounded in any particular relationship, and (c) there is no more general ground unifying these two species of duty. I think that such a view is not implausible, but at the very least it is coherent. However, if each source of reasons gave rise to a distinct favouring relation, then moral pluralism would be incoherent. Thus, we should reject any attempt to motivate pluralism from face value observations about the variety of sources of practical reasons.

4.2 A New Dilemma

In considering the proposal that morality and prudence are part of practical reason, Baker (2018: 238–40) raises a new dilemma for the unified view. He concedes that this approach might adequately explain the relations between morality, prudence, and ought *simpliciter*. However, he argues that a dilemma arises when we try to explain the relation between ought *simpliciter* and prescriptive social conventions, such as law and etiquette. The dilemma arises when we ask whether prescriptive social conventions are part of practical reason or not.

On the first horn, suppose that prescriptive social conventions are not part of practical reason. This means that reasons of social convention do not, as such, play a role in determining what one ought *simpliciter* to do. However, given that such conventions are apparently prescriptive, we now need to explain why these prescriptions lack the normative force or authority characteristic of practical reason. But specifying the relevant sense of force or authority was precisely the problem that Baker first raised against the unified view.

On the second horn, suppose that prescriptive social conventions are part of practical reason. This means that the relative authority of ought *simpliciter* compared to the

oughts of etiquette and law can be explained in the same manner as the oughts of morality and prudence. That is, what one ought to do as a matter of etiquette is what it *would* be the case that one ought *simpliciter* to do, *if only considerations of etiquette were in play*. Baker concedes that this gives us a determinate and non-metaphorical sense of normative authority. However, it comes at the cost of having highly implausible normative consequences. As Baker notes, many social conventions are awful: 'We have the Mafia's code of *Omerta*, feudal norms, the rules of etiquette surrounding race under Jim Crow, the rules of etiquette surrounding gender, conventions governing blood feuds, and general norms of machismo' (2018: 240). So if these standpoints generate practical reasons on a par with prudence and morality, then we have reasons to do all sorts of terrible things. Given that we do not have any such reasons, we cannot accept that prescriptive social conventions generate practical reasons.

It should already be clear how the account proposed in section 3 has the resources to deal with this objection. Because intuitions differ as to whether particular social conventions like etiquette generate practical reasons, it will be worth showing how each horn of the dilemma can be blunted.

First, suppose that etiquette is *not* authoritatively normative. To answer Baker's challenge, we need to non-circularly explain the sense in which etiquette is not authoritative without appealing to metaphor. But this is precisely what our account of ought *simpliciter* does. Specifically, it claims that the conceptual role of the ought of etiquette specifies no essential connection to intention. Accordingly, the content of ought judgments of etiquette will not concern the justification of action as such. A possible problem for this view is that it fails to explain why non-compliance licences criticism (Baker 2018: 239). However, assuming reasons of etiquette are not practical reasons, it is plausible that we have a standing (defeasible) practical reason to follow the norms of etiquette. This might be prudential, in so far as etiquette facilitates agreeable social interactions, and it might be moral, in so far as etiquette expresses a certain kind of respect for others. Either way, we can explain why we should sometimes follow etiquette even if etiquette as such is not normative.[18]

Next, suppose that etiquette *is* authoritatively normative. The ought of etiquette can then be explained in the same way as the ought of morality. However, given that our account has the resources to explain the difference between authoritatively normative standpoints and other kinds of normative standpoints, there is no reason to assume that all kinds of social convention must also be authoritatively normative, just because etiquette is. So the implausible normative consequences do not immediately follow. However, one might still worry that other problematic social conventions share the same features in virtue of which etiquette is robustly normative. If this is the case, it will follow that the ought of (say) machismo is what *would* be the case that you ought *simpliciter* to do, *if only considerations of machismo were in play*.

However, even assuming that this is the correct account of the *content* of such judgments, the problematic normative consequences do not follow. For we can deny at a first-order level that the ought claims of machismo are true. This, in effect, would be to hold an error theory about what machismo requires. Baker (2018: 239–40) worries that such an error theory is implausible. The worry seems to be that we do seem to know what the norms of machismo require (for example, a manly lack of

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[18] Compare Woods' (2018) notion of a standard's being *in force for us*. For an alternative way of understanding the apparent normativity of merely formal normative standards, see Wodak 2019.

concern), and so there must be *truths* about what it requires. However, this worry trades on an equivocation of 'requires', one authoritatively normative and one relative to the norms of machismo. By comparison, we can say true things about what utilitarianism (in one sense) requires, even if utilitarianism is not the correct theory of morality and so (in another sense) requires nothing. In short, neither horn of the dilemma presents any serious problems for the unified view.

5. Conclusion

This paper has provided an account of practical reason and our normative concepts that explains how practical deliberation is governed by a unitary normative standpoint. It also explains at the same time practical deliberation might be partly governed by distinct normative standpoints such as morality and prudence. The account provided is only a sketch. However, it is a view that is already familiar and developed in detail elsewhere. One major limitation of the sketch provided here is that not all practical reasoning concerns action. Specifically, much practical reasoning concerns how we should feel and what we should believe. Because such reasoning does not result in our intending to feel certain ways or to believe certain things, the account of ought *simpliciter* sketched here is too narrow to cover these cases. So a fully developed account of ought *simpliciter* will need to specify a more complex functional or conceptual role that covers ought *simpliciter* as it applies to belief and other attitudes.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

James L. D. Brown http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3875-592X

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