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Uggles and Muggles
Wedgwood on Normative Thought and Justification

James Lenman

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Wedgwood's The Nature of Normativity is an impressive contribution to metaethics, imaginative, painstaking, original and extremely scholarly. But while I am highly impressed, I confess myself wholly unconvinced. In what follows I try to outline some reasons for my failure to be persuaded.

1

In a galaxy far far away, there is a planet called 'Ug'. Ug is inhabited by just two species of animal, Uggles and Huggles. The Huggles are pretty simple creatures. They don't go in for language and can be credited with at best the most rudimentary forms of conceptual thought, intentionality or any of that stuff. But they are conscious creatures. They suffer and feel pain and do so in response to disease, physical trauma etc. just as do other more familiar creatures. The Uggles on the other hand are more like us, in this respect at least: they have the whole panoply of language and conceptual thought. They are also however a lot less nice than even the nastiest of us. Their predominant psychological feature is sadism directed at Huggles. What Uggles are mostly into doing is inflicting pain on Huggles as much and as often as they can. They don't get some tangible benefit from making Huggles suffer the way, say, lions do from killing zebras. It's just something they love to do. They are careful to refrain from anything that would risk wiping the Uggles out as that would leave them with no constituency for their sadism and render their lives, in their own eyes, lacking in purpose or meaning. For so central to their lives is their passion for inflicting suffering on Huggles that it dominates their practical, normative thought and centrally informs their understanding of what is desirable or choiceworthy. Thus there is nothing they consider more admirable in other Uggles than exhibitions of prowess in

and dedication to the practice of Huggle-torturing. Such sadistic convictions are entirely normal among Uggles and are perfectly stable for them under the most searching reflective scrutiny.

We may not much like Uggles but we could surely understand them. Cognitively they are in respectable shape: their perceptual apparatus and capacity for epistemic rationality work OK. And they are competent enough at the sort of procedural rationality they need to adopt means adequate to their dreadful ends. So while their conception of what is choiceworthy and desirable is crazy by our lights, they remain intelligible to us as intentional systems speaking something we can recognize as a language. They're not too bad at the true but, by our lights, they are rubbish at the good.

And indeed, by a wonderful cosmic coincidence, it turns out the language they speak looks strikingly like English. In this language they would say things like:

You ought to bash that Huggle harder. It will hurt him more. and

We ought not to attack those Huggles. There are others around here who are much more sensitive to pain.

Now there was once an Uggle philosopher whose name was Ralph Ugwood (of the University of Ugford) who wrote a book whose name, by another wonderful cosmic coincidence, was The Nature of Normativity. In his book Ugwood offered a conceptual role semantics for "ought" whereby 'A ought to ϕ' is a proposition the truth of which would make it correct for A to plan to ϕ. Correctness is a property that applies essentially to mental states and plays a regulative role in reasoning. Thus, for example, there are certain standards of correctness that apply to various kinds of mental states and these standards draw their authority from the ultimate purpose or point of the kind of state in question. Thus the point of the standards that govern belief is truth, while those of those that govern desire and choice are desirability and choiceworthiness (or simply, we might naturally say, goodness), these being essential features of belief, desire and choice. The capacities to have mental states of various kinds, and indeed to possess concepts are essentially rational dispositions, dispositions to respond to real normative features of one's antecedent mental states in forming news ones in essentially rational ways. That mental states respond in this way to normative features of other mental states shows that the normative features are real, causally efficacious features of the world. They may be realized in natural features of the world but they are not (Ugwood proceeds to argue) reducible to them.

Because the dispositions constitutive of the capacities to have various kinds of mental states are essentially rational we Uggles (Ugwood urged) must think of them as reliable indicators of the truth of the normative propositions to which they respond, of which antecedent mental states make it likely to be correct to respond in one way and not in another. The normative intuitions by which we determine what is or is not choiceworthy or good are either manifestations or simulations of dispositions that are essentially rational indicators of the facts about choicewor- thiness and goodness, sensitive to real normative features of our antecedent mental states in virtue of which certain choices and desires are likely to be correct. Thus suppose I, Ugwood, admire Professor Ugbad who shows particular inventiveness in devising novel ways to inflict unspeakable pain on Huggles. The disposition I manifest here is the disposition essential to the capacity for the mental state in question, admiration. Given this, then my admiration is a reliable indicator, in normal circumstances, assuming my beliefs about Ugbad's inventiveness are correct, that Ugbad's actions really are admirable.

Only of course they aren't. Ugbad's actions are hateful and cruel, neither admirable nor choiceworthy. And Ugwood's intuitions about what is choiceworthy and admirable are not responses to real normative properties of choiceworthiness and admirableness. For the properties to which these intuitions respond are not really choiceworthy or admirable but appalling. Moreover it is not an essential feature of, say, choice, that it responds to and is regulated by choiceworthiness. For the choices of Uggles do not and are not. But they are certainly choices.

Now back to Earth where there are no Uggles or Huggles, just us Muggles. Ralph Wedgwood is a Muggle philosopher whose first order normative views are far more civilized than are Ugwood's but whose metaethical take on them is really rather similar. I'm not sure what Wedgwood would say about the planet Ug and its disagreeable denizens. Perhaps Uggles have normative concepts, concepts quite different from our own but their normative concepts are deeply defective, essentially dependent on mistaken normative beliefs. But Wedgwood doesn't believe there can be concepts that are defective in this way. Thus it is not a defect in the concept "witch" that there are no witches as we see when we reflect that there is nothing defective in our thought, involving that very concept, that there are no witches. (pp. 172–173) Perhaps then Uggles are deploying some distinct concept, say choiceworthy$_{\text{Uggle}}$ but the concept as such is not defective as is seen when we apply it in the nondefective thought that what is choiceworthy$_{\text{Uggle}}$ is not choiceworthy at all. But for this to be true

Ugwood must be deeply mistaken in thinking choiceworthiness$_{Uggle}$ a normative concept which enjoys essentially its role in rationally guiding action by some regulative principle whereby if something is choiceworthy then it is correct to choose it. For our own understanding of this concept accords it no such regulative authority.

So are the Uggles' concepts of choiceworthiness, admirableness etc. just our own concepts, as Wedgwood understands them, applied in systematically mistaken ways? I don't see how they can be because the dispositions Uggles manifest in applying them are not essentially rational, do not respond to any facts about what it is correct to choose and admire, because the things Uggles are disposed to choose and admire are not things it is correct to choose and admire. Nor can it be proposed that circumstances are not normal or that Uggles intuitions are not in reflective equilibrium. For ex hypothesi they are perfectly normal (for Uggles) and perfectly stable under reflective scrutiny. (Of course they are only normal relatively locally, vis à vis the rational denizens of Ug, but it would be odd to view their status as such as compromised by the existence of us very differently thinking creatures located at the other end of the universe.)

But it would be philosophically advantageous to understand these Uggles concepts as our own mistakenly applied. For that allows us to make the clearest sense of the thought that the Uggles and ourselves disagree about what is good, admirable, choiceworthy and are not merely thinking at cross purposes when they assert, for example, that torturing Huggles is admirable and we that it is not. So it would be good to be able to recognize this while continuing to insist that Uggle intuitions about what is choiceworthy, admirable, good are not responses to real normative properties of choiceworthiness and admirableness, goodness.

They are certainly responses to something. It is perhaps most natural to say they are responses to, let us say, goodness$_{Uggle}$ where by that I mean being such as to speak to the normative sensibilities of Uggles. But of course the concept of goodness$_{Uggle}$ is not, when I speak of it, a normative concept at all: it lacks altogether the tie to motivation that is (Wedgwood and I agree) distinctive of the normative. That something is good$_{Uggle}$ in no way disposed me to desire or admire it or to think it would be correct for anyone to do so. Nor is goodness$_{Uggle}$, according to me, the concept Uggles themselves employ when they speak of goodness. For when they speak of goodness they express their normative sensibilities and do not merely ascribe to the things of which they speak the natural property of speaking to it. There is no need to clutter up our metaphysics with any distinctively normative properties answering to this concept. An expressivist account

of their normative language is all we need to make sense of what they are up to. And all we need to make sense of what we are up to.

2

Wedgwood devotes a chapter to expressivism. And with good reason. Expressivists can agree with Wedgwood and Ugwood that normative concepts are concepts that play the role of regulating thought and action in ways that are essential to an understanding both of normative concepts and of thought. Expressivism about normative concepts is extremely well suited to furnish a neat explanation of the truth of normative judgement internalism, a theoretical desideratum Wedgwood heavily stresses and which drives much of the argument both for his own view and against other rival views. For Wedgwood normative concepts are essentially concerned to regulate our thought and action and normative properties are those properties to which we respond in thinking and acting in ways so regulated. An embarassment for his view is just how little, apart from this, he is able to tell us about these properties. On completing his book the reader knows of these properties that they are properties such that if we are rational we will recognize that it is frightfully important we shape our thoughts and actions with a view to their having the positive normative properties and lacking the negative ones. But she isn't anywhere near as clear why this is so very important or what precisely these properties are. The expressivist avoid this embarrassment by relating a metaethical account of normativity in which no such properties fundamentally feature.

But Wedgwood thinks the expressivist has grounds for embarrassment of his own. His central concern arises from his demand that: "the fundamental explanation of the meaning of a normative statement must provide some account of these conditions or standards of justification and warrantedness." (pp. 49–50) Acknowledging that Gibbard in particular says rather a lot that speaks to this demand, he goes on however to complain:

"…it is not clear that it is enough for an account of the meaning of normative statements simply to enumerate the standards of justification and warranted- ness that these statements are subject to. Consider an agent who is agonizing about a normative question. For example, suppose that she is agonizing over the question of whether she ought to inform the police about a friend's criminal activities. In agonizing about the question she is striving to reach an answer to this question that is justified and warranted. But why should she bother agonizing

over this. What is the point of going to so much trouble? What would be so bad about reaching an answer to the question that is not justified and warranted?" (p. 50)

I myself think Gibbard's contribution to our understanding of normative justification and warrant rather too deep and impressive to be fairly characterized as a mere enumeration of anything. But I will focus here on the rhetorical questions with which the quoted passage ends. Unlike Wedgwood, I don't think these questions need embarrass the expressivist. For an expressivist, normative judgements express our normative sensibilities where these are fundamentally constituted not by a body of beliefs but by the passions in our souls. It is not a puzzle why it is agonizing when these passions conflict and why we should be interested in resolving such conflict. Stella cares about having stable and close relationships with other people shaped by strong norms of personal loyalty. She cares in particular about this friendship she enjoys with Simon and does not want to damage it by departing from such loyalty. And she cares about Simon. It distresses her to think of him going through the hardship and humiliation of arrest, conviction and perhaps imprisonment. But she cares about other stuff too. She knows Simon has hurt and injured someone in some serious and unlawful way and she is invested in ideals of justice and the rule of law that represent it as her duty to bring what he has done to the attention of the authorities. So she is torn by conflicting passionate concerns and seeks a resolution of that conflict. A satisfying resolution will likewise be one that speaks to the passions in her soul. She would like to make a decision about what to do that she can justify to herself and others. Thus she would like to make a decision that will conform as well as it can to those of her concerns and commitments she is most confident will be stable under reflection so that her choice will be one she can subsequently live with. And she would like to make a decision she can justify to others, to her other friends, her family, her fellow citizens, to Simon himself, ideally at least, where that justification will speak to concerns and commitments she shares with these others. These are the kinds of pressures that operate on her to make her care that her decision is justified and warranted in terms of the normative commitments, particular and general, local and global, higher and lower order, to which such justification would speak. When we understand these facts about her, her concern that her decision have some justification is not exactly mysterious. Justification is simply the bringing to bear of normative judgements on whatever we are seeking to justify and we care about normative judgements, according to us expressivists, because normative judgement just is caring, or a species of caring. Expressivism need not of course say that these passions in her soul are

what provide Stella's reasons.[1] But they are what her talk of reasons expresses and they explain why she finds reasons so very interesting. Inhabiting as she does the space of reasons her passions have shaped for her, she understands as clearly as she needs to, in their light, why the task of justifying her decisions and actions has the urgency it does. Not only, then, do we have a grip on why, causally and psychologically, Stella should care about making a decision that is justified; we can also obtain a grip on why, normatively speaking, she should do so. So I don't think expressivism is too gravely embarrassed explaining why we should bother with justification and warrant. And I'm not at all sure why the realist is himself so free of such embarrassment. For the realist like Wedgwood who accepts normative judgement internalism, facts about justification and other normative facts are certainly facts in which rational people necessarily take an immense interest. But why that should be so is not entirely clear.[2]

3

I turn finally to Wedgwood's discussion of normative epistemology. I have argued elsewhere that one strength of expressivism is that it is peculiarly well suited to make sense of normative intuitions and the significance we accord them.[3] But how does Wedgwood's realist account fare? He notes the standard anti-realist complaint that:

Many realists say little more than that we have some cognitive faculty— sometimes called "intuition" or "reason" or conscience"— which enables us to come to know and have justified belief in normative propositions; but the rarely give an account of how this alleged faculty operates, or how it could serve as a reliable source of knowledge, or what could justify us in relying on it." (p. 225)

He claims to show however that "realism can provide a satisfactory explanation of the epistemology of normative beliefs". (p. 226) I remain unconvinced.

His account like many others accords a central place to normative intuitions. He seeks to vindicate the reliability of these by regarding them as manifestations or simulations of dispositions that are essentially rational. It is, he argues, "a crucial… assumption of many psychological explanations that we often form a belief or other attitude precisely because our antecedent mental states make it rational for us

[1] Blackburn 1998, Gibbard, 1990.
[2] Lenman 2009, esp. pp. 9-10.
[3] Lenman 2007.

to do." (p. 246) Reflection on the mental workings of Uggles makes this claim doubtful. The most we should concede is perhaps that "we often form a belief or other attitude precisely because our antecedent mental states make it rational by, our own lights, for us to do." For this to be true we need no facts about norms, only, as it were, facts about lights, facts about the passions in our souls that our distinctively normative judgements express. Likewise Uggle normative beliefs are rational by their lights but not by ours. But Uggles, as we saw, are not entirely irrational: they are rubbish at the good but OK at the true: so they are ethically perverse but not unintelligible. Other still weirder creatures, creatures whose epistemic and procedural thought was as crazy as Uggles evaluative thought, might not even be intelligible as thinking, believing desiring creatures at all. But, pace Wedgwood at p. 190, where I think rather too much is concluded from an example where we are invited to imagine ourselves very weird indeed, that possibility does not defeat the supposition that it is rationality by the lights of the interpretee that counts here. It at most restricts its application to exclude interpretees of whose thought we can make no rational sense of at all. And the horizons of normative commonality are far closer than the horizons of normative intelligibility.

A central aspect of Wedgwood's attempt to vindicate the credibility of normative intuitions is his invocation of the credibility of sensory experience as, in effect, a companion in guilt. Here he invokes a notion of primitive rationality, such that primitively rational ways to form beliefs are ways of forming beliefs that are basically, as opposed to independently or antecedently, rational. Of course it would be circular to appeal to empirical evidence for the credibility of one's sensory experience. But we may nonetheless be warranted in thinking it primitively rational to trust such experience. How so? Well, Wedgwood suggests, "[i]t may be that it is essential to sensory experience that any subject who has such experiences has some disposition to have experiences that veridically represent certain aspects of her environment." Well, yes, perhaps that may be true and it would be epistemologically very convenient if it was true but I can't, at this point, find enough in the way of argument in its support for it to look like much more than an optimistic conjecture.

Rather more promisingly to my mind, Wedgwood also suggests a possible pragmatic rationale for taking one's sensory experiences at face value:

We could not function as agents at all unless we had some beliefs about our immediate environment. So it would be unreasonable to demand

that we should not form any beliefs about our immediate environment at all. It would also be unreasonable to demand that we should not form beliefs of this kind in any way unless we had independent or antecedent reasons for regarding this way of forming beliefs as reliable…. In short we need to treat some way of forming beliefs about our environment as primitively rational; and so it would be unreasonable to expect us to do otherwise. (pp. 231–232)

He stresses that this pragmatic rationale only warrants our taking some such way of forming beliefs as primitively rational. It does not recommend "taking our sensory experiences at face value over astrology or reading the tea leaves, for example." (p. 232) That's significant, in part, I guess, because if the pragmatic rationale could sustain the latter recommendation, it would make it antecedently rational to trust one's sensory experience and make the invocation of primitive rationality unnecessary.

The status of normative intuitions and sensory experience are, he urges, comparable and the invocation of primitive rationality to vindicate trust in them comparably credible (p. 246). I doubt this. To see why, let's remind ourselves of some facts about sensory experiences.

First of all, sensory experiences have not one but multiple sources. We have not one but several (rather more nowadays I am told than the traditional five) sensory modalities that represent the world in stable and systematically mutually coherent ways. As well as this systematic intrapersonal coherence across my own plural sensory modalities, I encounter a like systematic coherence between my own sensory experiences and the reported such experience of other people. These sensory experiences represent to me a world that constrains and shapes my agency in predictably stable and recalcitrant ways, as I remember whenever I try to walk through walls. But the opposite is also true: my agency can shape it in ways that feed back into the character of my subsequent sensory experience. When I am bothered by the discomfort of feeling hungry, I find I can address the problem pretty effectively by trusting my sensory experiences to guide me towards food. But I'd find, I'm pretty sure (typical armchair-bound philosopher, I confess I haven't tried), that if I relied here instead on tea leaves and the planets I'd stay hungry. So I suspect we can take the pragmatic rationale considerably further than Wedgwood suggests, ruling out teabags and astrology, in which case the rationality of trusting our senses is no longer so very obviously so very primitive. (Of course the foregoing reasoning might just move the bump elsewhere on the carpet leaving us wondering about the rationality, primitive or

otherwise, of inductive reasoning. Perhaps there are grounds to treat that as primitively rational but that is not a question for another day.)

The world presented in sensory experience is, moreover, systematically orderly in way that allow us to regiment our experience of it in the ways that have enabled us to arrive at modern science which provides us with a picture, incomplete of course but already extraordinarily detailed and powerful, of a lawfully ordered, natural world. And this scientific picture of the world that we have constructed from our sensory experience is a picture of world in which we and our sensory experiences (whose aetiology it describes and explains in some detail) are incorporated as a rather small, extremely local, very recently evolved part in ways that heavily undermine the thought that it is merely something we construct, rather than something real and objective, existing prior to and independently of our sensory engagement with it.

The bare epistemic possibility might remain that the world is a mere figment engineered by an evil demon or malevolent neuroscientist. But, in many ways, I might not much care. It would remain the world I inhabit, experientially speaking. The flowers would smell no less sweet, the music sound no less enchanting. The world I experience would still shape and be shaped by my agency. What might matter, for sure, is the reality of other people. But here again pragmatic considerations plausibly have considerable bite.[4] I'd rather risk being wrong in supposing you all to be more than merely zombies or virtual figments of the evils neurologist's software than risk being wrong by thinking that is all you are. And if that pragmatic warrant is at all telling, the pragmatic rationale for trusting our senses is thereby still further deepened and reinforced. For I can't credit you with psychological reality unless I take seriously the sensory experience of your bodily reality without which I could not identify you as an individual at all.

Compare and contrast. The picture of the natural world disclosed by science is a world that incorporates us and our sensory experience. It does not, in contrast, at least unless and until we supplement science with some distinctly questionable metaphysics, incorporate any normative facts at all. And the working of a capacity for normative intuition, as Wedgwood characterizes it, is not something natural science shows any sign of illuminating or indeed, at least qua receptive to a domain of normative facts, detecting. And while, for reasons I have gestured at above, I suspect the pragmatic rationale for taking sensory experience seriously goes very much deeper than Wedgwood allows, there is simply no pragmatic warrant for normative realism or for crediting normative intuition with disclosing to us a

[4] Cf. Lenman 1994.

domain of normative facts. It's certainly true that thought and agency would be paralysed without normative thought and that such thought relies indispensibly on normative intuitions. But when, as we expressivists do, we purge both our normative thought and our understanding of normative intuition of any realist presuppositions, we find that our normative life continues undisturbed. All that changes is the philosophy and that improves.[5]

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[5] Cf. Blackburn 1993.