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Deliberation, Schmeliberation: Enoch's Indispensibility Argument

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When you are going on holiday to the South Pole, you ought to pack your winter woollies. When you are going to see Aunt Agatha on her birthday, you might very sensibly take her some of those nice chocolates she likes. When you are visiting the lions at the safari park, it is a bad idea to get out of the car. Normative facts such as these do not strike me as very puzzling or mysterious or as offering very significant hostages to metaphysical fortune. Nothing, it might seem, could be more homely and straightforward. More extended stretches of practical reasoning appear similarly plain sailing. Tomorrow is Christmas Day and I am driving north to my family in Scotland. Because Scotland is far away I will want to stop and eat something. But because, in the UK, where I live, Christmas Day is a major holiday, nowhere will be open except a few petrol stations, and because the food you can buy in petrol stations is not very nice, it would make sense to prepare something in advance and take it with me. I have bread and there is chicken in the fridge that needs using up – it will go off before I get back. I am not a vegetarian. I like chicken. So I should make myself some chicken sandwiches. This is the sort of thing we call deliberation and of course we do it all the time.

David Enoch's Taking Morality Seriously[1] is an admirably lucid and spirited defence of robust realism about the normative domain, the domain of reasons and values[2] that guide and inform such thinking. The robustness distinguishes his realism from more metaphysically unassuming forms of normative realism. It holds normative truths to be irreducible to natural ones and views them as strongly mind-independent. Of course they might nonetheless be mind-dependent in the sense that their truth-conditions may be as psychological as you please: it would be consistent with robust mind-independence that the only things noninstrumentally worth pursuing are states of desirable consciousness. The kind of mind-independence Enoch insists on is a matter of the facts about our consciousness, or what we, or anyone, wants or believes or any other psychological facts not determining that what these truth conditions are. As Enoch puts it, "normative truths do not constitutively depend on our responses or attitudes or desires." (p. 4)

If the view of the normative Enoch defends here is right, this deliberation is a much stranger and less straightforward business than I have hitherto thought. It is, we naturally suppose, a process guided by reasons but being guided by reasons is not like being guided by footpaths or signposts or the sat nav system in your car. For these reasons, or more properly their status as such, let us say, the normative truths to the effect that they are reasons (see pp. 220-221), are wholly invisible, not just to sight but to any of the sensory modalities by which the natural world impinges on our

[1] Oxford, OUP, 2011. Page references are to Enoch's book unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Enoch uses the term 'normative' liberally and doesn't sharply distinguish between the normative and the evaluative. (See p.2.) In what follows, neither will I.

cognitive capacities. Rather the guidance in question is fabulously indirect. We are guided in our deliberation by our normative beliefs. And our normative beliefs are shaped by the psychological dispositions the blind processes of our evolutionary development have landed us with, tidied up a bit by the efforts of our critical intelligence to bring them, or the judgements that express them, into reflective equilibrium (p. 166). But nonetheless there is some correlation between the resulting beliefs and the normative truths because the metaphorical "aim" of evolution, roughly the aim implicit in the quasi-teleological understanding we bring to bear on living things and processes when we adopt the design stance in evolutionary explanation, something like survival perhaps, or perhaps some thing or some bunch of things reliably conducive to that "aim" (p. 172), happens to be good. Here the phrase "happens to be" is apposite. Evolution doesn't have the "aim" it does because that aim is good: the causal inertness of the normative rules that out. It's just a happy cosmic coincidence, a miracle, as Enoch concedes (p. 172-173). It is a little puzzling too how we could ever know the "aim" of evolution, or some thing or things intimately connected with it, was good. Here Enoch appeals to the fact that this supposition is really extremely plausible, "hard to deny" as he puts it. But this looks like a simple appeal to normative intuition which, coming at a point in the argument where the credibility of such intuition is at issue, is surely profoundly question-begging. Of course, after all, we find this hard to deny. Given the way we have evolved, to echo Mandy Rice-Davies, we would, wouldn't we? The upshot of all this is what Enoch calls "a (Godless) pre-established harmony explanation" (p. 168) of how it might come about that our normative beliefs might have at least some tendency to line up, more or less, with the normative truths.

This story strikes me as starkly incredible. I don't think I need to believe it in order to make sense of what I am doing when I figure out that it would be a good idea to make sandwiches before a long road trip. But maybe I do. Maybe this is the best account of normative epistemology the robust normative realist can have and so, if there are compelling grounds to believe robust normative realism, we need to believe it. Enoch thinks there are such grounds. And the centrepiece of his case for this contention is the argument in chapter 3 that normative truths of the kind he favours are indispensable for deliberation. So let us turn to that.

Enoch thinks normative truths are deliberatively indispensable.[3] Rather more precisely he thinks a commitment to such truths is instrumentally indispensible to deliberation in such a way that we could make no sense of deliberation succeeding if there were no such truths, and he thinks deliberation itself intrinsically indispensible in that abstaining from deliberation is not an option for us. His argument for this, as he notes, has a delicate course to navigate:

> What we need… is an account of deliberation that satisfies two desiderata. First, deliberation… must plausibly be considered a rationally non-optional project. And, second, irreducibly normative truth must be indispensable for deliberation. Unfortunately, though, these desiderata seem to pull in opposite directions. The thicker one's account of deliberation – the more one is willing to build into it as necessary conditions – the more plausible it is that irreducibly normative truths

[3] He notes (p. 75, note 60) that the thought is not novel, having been anticipated in various ways by Nagel, Bond, Darwall, Kolnai, Pettit and Smith. The list might be extended by mentioning Taylor 1989, chapter 3 and Lieberman 1998 where similar moves are made. My argument against Enoch here is largely by way of elaboration of an argument made rather breathlessly in a short review of the latter. (Lenman 2000).

> are indispensable for deliberation, but the less plausible it is that opting out of the (thickly understood) deliberative project is not a rationally acceptable option; the thinner one's understanding of deliberation, the more plausible it is that deliberation is rationally non-optional, but the less plausible it is that deliberation requires irreducibly normative truths. The challenge is to steer a middle course. (pp. 71-2)

This passage show that Enoch has neatly anticipated my central objection to his argument. For I will argue that, for all that he is self-forewarned of this challenge, his attempt to meet it flounders. The most that is really intrinsically indispensible is a decidedly thin sort of deliberation for which irreducibly normative truths are not indispensible at all. Or so I shall argue.

When I deliberate about something, in Enoch's own central example, when I deliberate about whether to embark on a career in law or in philosophy, I am posing questions to myself in a way that presupposes that there better and worse ways of answering them. The deliberative enterprise, the attempt to answer these questions well, "doesn't feel like just trying to make an arbitrary choice. That is just what it is not like to deliberate. Rather it feels like trying to make the right choice." (p. 72) Deliberation is like choosing, not picking. Unlike picking it is "an attempt to eliminate arbitariness by discovering (normative) reasons" (p. 74) and presupposes that there are such reasons to be discovered. Phenomenologically, it feels like engaging with a factual question where there is a right answer for us to find, one constituted prior to our deliberation. In deliberating we commit ourselves to the reality of the normative reasons without which our deliberating would make no sense, without which there could be nothing to count as it succeeding. (p. 78)

Of course deliberation is not arbitrary. It is something that can be done well or done badly. Enoch's own example of deliberating about one's career shows this well enough. Here it is not so obvious there are definitely right and wrong answers[4] but there are certainly good ones and stupid ones. In choosing a career I want to choose a profession for which there is enough demand that I will have a reasonable hope of making a living at it, preferably a good living that will keep my and any dependants in comfort and security. I want something that is a good match with my talents, a line of work I will find tough enough, given my abilities, to challenge me, if I am not to be bored, but not so tough I find myself out of my depth and the stress drives me to drink. I very likely want it to be something I enjoy, something I feel is socially worthwhile. This is not at all like picking. It is an enterprise such that, if I do it well, I am more likely to find myself happy, happy with the self-respect consequent on supporting myself and others by making some useful contribution to the world or at least my little corner of it, happy when at work to be doing something useful that I enjoy, happy when not at work that I can enjoy my leisure in some comfort. If I do it badly I am more likely to find myself, miserable, depressed, impoverished, unemployed.

But none of this looks very arbitrary. None of this looks to me like the absence of robust normative truths will leave it arbitrary. Modest normative truths will do fine. Give me modest normative truths and I will give you standards to evaluate deliberation in nonarbitrary ways. Other things equal, those of us who deliberate well flourish and prosper, those who do so badly do not, those who do so

[4] Think e.g. of James Griffin's classic discussion of the competing calls of scholarship and mountaineering in his 1986, pp. 109ff.

well succeed in their projects and enterprises, those who do so badly do not. The bad practical reasoner is stuck in a job she hates, and forcing herself to eat some filthy mass-produced pasty reheated in the petrol station's micorowave. I on the other hand have this quite nice job and these lovely chicken sandwiches stashed in my car.

But, an impatient reader may protest, that just moves the problem further back. That I would be unhappy in the Royal Marines is a reason not to pursue a career there only if it matters that I not be unhappy. And of course that matters: whoever would want to be unhappy? But now perhaps we have found modest normativity out. It answers to standards set by our desires and what is normative about them? There would to be some more robust normative truths underwriting these desires, perhaps a normative truth to the effect that we should aim to satisfy our desires. Or a landscape of normative truths that our particular desires somehow reflect. Otherwise it is all still arbitrary: "We need normative truths even if, viewed from a third-person perspective, our desires suffice in order to cause our actions and then explain them, because, when deliberating we know our desires are merely our desires." (p. 76)

Trouble is we have arbitrariness and arbitrariness. This talk of arbitrariness brings to mind Quinn's famous Radio Man[5] acting on some brute, inferentially isolated impulse to activate a radio. That is indeed decidedly rationally arbitrary. And here is Albert turning the radio on in order to listen to Bach's Mass in B-Minor. He does this because he loves Bach's Mass and knows he will really enjoy listening to it. He is free of other commitments for the next hour or so, free of competing immediate claims on his time from project or people close to him. He knows he will enjoy listening to the Bach and also considers this enjoyment worthwhile, because it is a sort of rich aesthetic enjoyment of beautiful works of art that has a central place in the sort of life Albert most values. While Radio Man has one desire, Albert has thousands, ranging from brute appetites to rich and complex ideas expressing the kind of man he wants to be and the kind of live he wants to live. His desires are not arbitrary but are each subject to critical scrutiny in the light of the complex landscape of ends set by the others. Moving through this landscape he seeks to deliberate in ways whose outcomes will cohere with his reflectively stable aspirations for the sort of life he wants to make for himself and the sort of world he wants to cooperate with others in shaping. This is not arbitrary.[6]

Oh yes it is, someone might reply. Ultimately it is. A given choice may enjoy a certain local non-arbitrariness given the space of aims that shape it. But the whole landscape, the totality of Albert's concerns, desires and aims taken as a whole, that is just arbitrary. And even if we urged that this is not quite so because no man is an island and it is on the shared concerns, desires and aims of larger normative communities, our aims and not just mine, that we should focus here, the objection will return that that, taken as a whole is still ultimately brutely contingent, ultimately just grounded in the attitudes we happen to find ourselves with (cf. p.80).

Well, OK, but here's the thing. Consider the sort of practical thinking where we try to do well with respect to standards of evaluation set by all those deeply entrenched concerns and aspirations we humans happen to have, aspirations

[5] Quinn 1993, p 236ff.
[6] Cf. my 2005, pp. 40-41, 2009a, pp. 6-7, 2009b, pp. 196-198, 2010, pp 186-187.

for pleasure, flourishing, love, prosperity, peace, justice, security, country air and all that other stuff we happen to like but remain cheerfully indifferent to normative truths as Enoch conceives them. Let's call mental activity of this sort schmeliberation. And, for now at least, call the stuff Enoch thinks he goes in for deliberation. Now notice, first that, whetever else is true of schmeliberation, there is certainly something to count as its succeeding. That something is a standard, or, better perhaps, a contextually variable set of standards set by our aims in all their ultimate contingency. But a standard is a standard and a standard is all we need. Secondly, I think I can now very plausibly claim this about schmeliberation. The difference between deliberation and schmeliberation is not remotely like the difference invoked by Enoch between picking and choosing. And one crucial and conspicuous way in which the former difference differs from the latter is that it is highly phenomenologically unobtrustive. Picking a pack of Kelloggs Mini-Wheats out of the dozens on the supermarket shelf feels like trying to make an arbitrary choice, it doesn't feel like trying to get anything right. So it is easy to see that, when we deliberate, this is not what we are doing. But schmeliberating does not feel like picking either. It doesn't feel arbitrary at all. It feels like something I can do well, when the life that results from it is a happy life that will bear my survey[7], and like something I can screw up at as many of those who are miserable, depressed, impoverished, unemployed, with no nice chicken sarnies to eat can sadly attest.[8] Schmeliberating, I contend, feels just like how deliberating feels. So, insofar as Enoch's argument rests on an appeal to the phenomenology of deliberation, it doesn't amount to much.

Yes but it is all still "mere" desire. Where does the normativity get in unless we also "commit ourselves to the judgement that our desire made the relevant action the one it made most sense to perform" (p. 75[9]) This "very Kantian" thought (p. 76) is a familiar objection to all roughly Humean takes on practical reason[10] and there are many rich and resourceful Humean responses to it in the literature.[11] Enoch does not review all the relevant arguments and nor will I. Briefly, on my own view there is no real mystery.[12] On my own view a space of reasons is just is a space of desires. But not – and this is where naturalistic views fall down – as viewed from a third person perspective. A space of reasons is a space of desires as a space of desires presents itself when those desires are one's own. What reason talk expresses are the passions in our souls, ordered and shaped by critical intelligence.[13] Our talk of normativity just expresses the force that attaches to motivation we feel from unalienated desires, desires with which we

[7] Hume, 1740, book III, part III, section 6, paragraph 6, Tiberius, 2002, 2008, Lenman 2009b.

[8] Of course the links between good deliberation and prospering are always loose, probabilistic and hemmed in with ceteris paribus clauses. I would hate for any reader to attribute to me any obnoxious, ignorant and simplistic suppositions about the deliberative superiority of us relatively comfortable folk to others less well circumstanced.

[9] Pronouns changed from 3rd sing. to 1st plural for syntactical consistency

[10] Influential versions can be found in Hampton 1998, Korsgaard 2008..

[11] Tiberius 2000 and Hubin 2001 are just two fine papers chosen (not merely picked) from a large literature. See also my 1999. (The term "Humean" gets applied both to expressivist metaethical theories and to various forms of descriptive naturalism. As will be apparent my own sympathies are with the former but the writings of adherents to the latter are also often rich in resources with which to combat less metaphysically unassuming forms of realism.)

[12] Cf. Lenman 1999, 2007,, 2009a, 2009b, 2010.

[13] It might be objected that there would be little for critical intelligence to do unless we were to attribute some more or less robust sort of normativity at least to epistemic reason. In particular Cuneo 2007 might inspire such a concern. In Lenman 2008 I sketch a response.

stably reflectively identify. This need not commit us to accept a normative judgement to the effect that it is our desires that make the relevant action the one it makes most sense to perform. To suppose that would be to make my normative thought, in implausible ways, all about me[14], and it is not. My normative thought is about whatever my desires are about and many of them are not about me at all. Of course there is a level of metaethical explanation at which we may recognize that it is just me or, better perhaps, just us.[15] But so long as we, and in particular our evaluative sensibilities, do not become hateful to ourselves, I guess we can live with that.

Deliberation, Enoch claims, is intrinsically indispensible. I'm happy to concede that something like this is true. Of course we could give up deliberating. But we couldn't give up deliberating the way we might give up playing golf or smoking cigarettes. To give up deliberating would be to give up living (and that of course is always an option). But, and again the point is crucial the sense in which it is true that deliberation in intrinsically indispensible is one where deliberation need be no more than "mere" schmeliberation.

Here is a fine young fellow, call him Enoch, who believes this wild story about a robustly real domain of normative truths. When he deliberates he thinks he is guided, if not quite by these truths, for they are, let's face it, too remote from us to guide anything, but at least by beliefs about them, beliefs he trusts a (Godless) pre-established harmony is disposing to be something better than complete baloney. But now imagine something remarkable happens. Reading the critical studies I and my colleagues have contributed to this excellent symposium, our imaginary Enoch changes his mind. So now what he will do? Where is he left without his previous beliefs. Is he perhaps just to stop deliberating? Hardly. Conceivably – but not very probably – a sense of finding himself of a world suddenly stripped of normative significance might drive him to paralysing despair; but, like the troubled youth described by Hare in "Nothing Matters"[16], he would probably not remain long in that unhappy state. Of course he would no longer believe in a robustly real domain of normative facts that happened to match up with the things evolutionary and other forces had shaped him to care about. But he would nonetheless still care, and in some cases care a great deal, about the things evolutionary and other forces had shaped him to care about. He may no longer take himself to inhabit a world populated by robustly real normative truths but he remains an intelligent creature with passions in his soul. Notwithstanding the loss of his belief in robustly real normative truths, he still cares about his own prosperity and happiness, about the wellbeing of his family and friends and the continued flourishing of his relationships with them, about the success of his various projects (finishing that book, building that outhouse), about living a whole life that will bear his survey in the light of such ideals of the person as he stably reflectively endorses (all this of course just a load more "mere" desires). He still cares about the small things (which are often not so small): still likes relaxing over a good detective story, perhaps, or enjoying a few beers after an energetic country walk. And he still cares about the big things, about justice and peace, kindness and courtesy, still feels motivated to participate in the various conversations that may

[14] Blackburn especially is eloquent on this point. See his 1984, p. 217-220, 1998, pp. 250-256. Cf Lenman 2010.
[15] Nagel 1997. Cf. Lenman 2010, p. 193. On the nuanced character of quasi-realist mind-independence Gibbard 2011 is particularly illuminating.
[16] Hare 1972. Many will observe that this little narrative also has an obvious debt to Blackburn 1993.

occur in his political community about how best to serve these and other values. Given a sufficiency of critical intelligence and self-command, he can still schmeliberate – or, as we Humeans prefer just to call it, deliberate - about how to live out each day in ways that will partake of all these good things (for that is what we Humeans think they are). All he will miss out on is any prospect of his response to the reasons (for that is what we Humeans think they are) that thereby engage him enjoying the invisible ratification of an inscrutable domain of putative "normative truths"[17]. But I struggle to understand why anybody would care about that.

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[17] It is not just the putativity that motivates the scare quotes here. Enoch extends (section 7,6) his pre-established harmony to explain how, on his view, it could ever come about, that e.g. the English expression "normative truths" could ever succeed in coming to have a semantic value in any way connected to the normative truthas he understands them. But my imaginary post-realist Enoch no longer believes this unlikely story.

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