

Why There Is a Problem of Normativity and How Should We Find a Solution?

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ABSTRACT: Every normative claim is faced with the questions of how and why we should accept it. Jonathan Weinberg *et al.* think there is no good answer to these questions and call this the “normativity problem.” I argue that if we try to posit that there is a problem of normativity, then logically we will fall into circularity – even if these questions of normativity do not have any answer. But there is still a problem that emerges in conflict resolution between normative issues. To avoid circularity, I formulate this problem and call it the “revised problem of normativity.” Next, I enumerate and assess probable responses to this revised edition of the problem. Finally, I defend “basic normative issue(s)” as the only valid solution to the revised problem as well as the possibility of a scientific surveyability of it (them).

Introduction

Philosophical appeals to normativity are exceptionally widespread. As Stephen Finlay mentions, there has been major development in recent decades on subjects traditionally considered “normative,” including ethics, practical reason, political and legal philosophy, and epistemology (331). But any claim in each of these subjects – regarding any normative issue (NI) – is faced with the questions of why and how we should accept it. Specifically, in epistemology, Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich ask the following about any strategy that has normative output: “Why should we try to do what these outputs claim we ought to do in matters epistemic? Why, in short, should we take any of this stuff seriously?” They think there is no good answer to these questions and call it the “normativity problem” (434).¹ These questions can be applied to other sorts of normative issues, and then the problem will be extended to all of them.²

The Problem of Normativity Revised

This claim that “there is a problem of normativity” needs to be argued as does any other claim. But to begin arguing, it is necessary to have a premise like “Any

NI *ought* to be justified.” The word “justified” may be replaced with other words – e.g., “warranted,” “reliable,” or any other normative term – but in any case, this premise itself is an NI and thus itself is based on a vicious regress. On the other hand, revising this premise into a non-normative one makes it logically impossible to claim that there is a *problem* here; why should we have an answer to questions such as the one above?³ Introducing the problem in this way leads to logical inconsistencies, so I began to revise it in a new way:

- 1) The conflict resolution between two NIs – e.g., NI1 and NI2 – requires at least one pre-accepted NI – e.g., NI3 – that is not equally compatible with both NI1 and NI2.
- 2) Either NI3 resolves the conflict between NI1 and NI2 or not.
 - a. If so, then NI3 is at an *upper* level to NI1 and NI2.
 - b. If not, it means there is another NI – e.g., NI4 – in the same level of NI3 that conflicts with it. Then the cycle should be continued until the conflict(s) is (are) resolved. The NI that resolves the conflict(s) will be *uppermost* of all of those conflicting NIs.
- 3) Any NI at the uppermost level is an NI as well, and then it is possible for

two of them to conflict. In that case, we need at least one NI as the most uppermost of those uppermost NIs.

- 4) Apparently, there is an infinite regress in NIs, so why would this not be a vicious one?

If this formulation is valid, then when there are two conflicting NIs, there is a problem of normativity. If this problem is a real one (which it is, of course, if we are realists), it means that the conflict resolution between our NIs will reach a dead-end. Then two problems are possible: if this dead-end occurs in a person (individually), it is the sign of mental disorganization, and if it occurs at a social level, dialogue will be logically impossible and the problem of *cognitive diversity* will emerge.

This revised edition has the advantage that premise 1 needs to be supposed only in the case that there are two conflicting NIs. In that case, even if this premise is claimed as an NI, it will not lead to a vicious regress. Moreover, this premise is a lighter presupposition and expands the variety of philosophers who can sympathize with and discuss it.

Probable Responses to the Problem

The problem here is tripartite: “vicious,” “infinite,” and “regress” in NIs; therefore, any theory that can defeat one of these parts can resolve the problem. Moreover, if the significance of normativity can be denied, the problem will be *dissolved*. So it seems these responses are possible:

- 1) Arguing for the insignificance of causing an obstruction for the resolution of conflicting NIs or arguing for the possibility of eliminating NIs altogether (normativity eliminativism).
- 2) Proposing a non-hierarchical structure for the resolution of conflicting NIs.
- 3) Accepting this infinite regress and arguing that it is not vicious.

- 4) Proposing a basis on which to terminate the regress:

- a. An *is*-based basis.
- b. An *ought*-based basis.

Assessing which Response Is most Acceptable

Response 1): If this response is best, and if we suppose the ability for someone to accept it or not, then *ought* s/he accept this choice? If “Yes,” then why? Answering “No” makes this response useless and offers no reason for anyone else to accept it; answering “Yes” makes it self-refuting.

Response 2): There are two ways to define this response: to deny the hierarchy in the set of NIs or to propose a revised coherence theory appropriate to this revised edition of the problem and to make a criterion for arbitrating between two NIs. The first way suggests that we *prefer* one of the conflicting NIs without getting help from any *upper* NI. The dichotomy here is whether we understand “prefer” arbitrarily or as an output of a non-hierarchical mechanism. The first choice suggests that the reasonability of choosing between NIs would not be a matter of importance. A non-hierarchical mechanism can be proposed as some theory like a “coherence theory of normativity” and, if possible, can be generated by such an idea so that the conflict resolution between two NIs is contingent on the answer to this question: which of these two (NI1 or NI2) is more coherent within the individual/social system of NIs? This one response is both possible and valid.⁴ Aside from being possible, validity carries with it the idea of normativity, and it is possible for this NI to conflict with another NI. Why should we prefer the coherentist account, then? Any attempt to answer in a coherentist manner begs the question, and if there is a non-coherentist criterion, then why should this criterion not be considered for arbitrating among other NIs?

Response 3): Infinitism is a possible response to the problem of justification,

relying on the idea that we can have an infinite number of justified beliefs based on two separate meanings of “belief”: “already formed dispositions” and “the disposition to form dispositions” (Klein). But I think this cannot generate an efficient theory answering this revised problem of normativity, because when a conflict between NIs arises, the conflict is *conscious*, not *dispositional*, and it requires at least one conscious upper NI to resolve it.

Response 4a): Regarding this response, at least in the last step of resolving conflicts between NIs, that two (or more) conflicting NIs are resolved can be inferred from “is-based criteria” without any NI. Obviously, this idea is contrary to the first defining premise of the problem, subsequently making this response invalid.

Response 4b): This revised edition of the problem is free from the concept of justification or any similar concept, which exerts force on even single NIs. Then there is no question of validity of each step of the conflict resolution between NIs that just *takes place*. The problem of normativity emerges only when a conflict cannot be solved. So this response is at least logically possible and ready for further assessment, which will be offered in the next section.

The Possibility of a Basic NI and Its Scientific Surveyability

Before assessing the possibility of basic NI(s), it is necessary to consider whether there is a possible situation in which two conflicting NIs stay conflicted in spite of having the same uppermost NI(s) or not. I think this situation occurs in this simple scenario:

Two passengers in the same car conflict on two NIs: “We should turn back”; “We should go ahead.” Interestingly, they have common NIs – e.g., about the destination (e.g., New York), road safety, the distance, and routes. Then what is the quarrel about? There is nothing but this: The

first one thinks that New York is behind them and the other thinks that New York is further ahead.

Now I can define a basic NI, calling it BNI afterwards: An NI is a basic one (BNI) if and only if the diversity of all of lower NIs is due solely to descriptive issues (DIs).

Having this definition, the claim that there is at least one BNI seems to be reasonable at least at the personal level:

- 1) Either the conflict between two NIs is solely due to contrary DIs or not.
- 2) If so, an NI at the highest level of those uppermost NIs is a BNI.
- 3) If not, the conflict between NIs at the upper levels will go on to the highest level of NIs.
- 4) If there are two (or more) conflicting NIs at the highest level of a person’s NI-system, then that person necessarily falls into a state of mental disorganization.
- 5) At least for healthy people, there are no conflicted NIs at the highest level of their NI-system.
- 6) At least healthy people have one BNI or a few non-conflicting BNIs.

At the trans-personal, or social, level, premises 1 to 4 remain valid. But it seems we should not confidently suppose premise 5 at this level, so it is possible that there is no BNI in at least some social groups. Accepting this result, I think all the remaining options remain valid at the trans-personal level. If it is so – and because we always see many conflicts in the social set of NIs – these conclusions seem valid:

- 1) The social set of NIs has a hierarchical structure similar to that of the individual.
- 2) This hierarchical structure is constructed with individuals’ BNIs.
- 3) It is possible to have an obstruction in the process for resolving conflicting NIs at any level of the social structure.

- 4) The level height of this obstruction – if it occurs at all – is in direct proportion to the extent of normativity relativism (and the limits of dialogue).
- 5) It is possible to study this hierarchical structure empirically, step by step, to see which individual's BNIs are monogenic and have resolvable conflicts when an obstruction arises and dialogue is obstructed.

As Quine opened the way for scientific studies in epistemology, the problem of normativity and its influence over philosophical questions on plurality of norms and values, the possibility of multiculturalism and dialogue among cultures and civilizations, the universality of moral rules, and so on can be surveyed in a way similar to that used recently by experimental philosophy that considered problems like epistemic normativity (Weinberg *et al.*), free will (Nahmias *et al.*), and moral responsibility (Nichols and Knobe) by studying intuitions. I think my results follow William James' predictions that "Science and metaphysics [or other sorts of philosophy] would come much nearer together, would in fact work absolutely hand in hand" (51).

As Milton Rokeach – who can be called the veteran of scientific studies of human values – says, "Understanding human values is a never-ending process – a groping toward an ultimate objective that can be attained only by a method of successive approximation" (ix). Again, we remember James when he tells us, "Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest. We don't lie back upon them, we move forward, and, on occasion, make nature over again by their aid" (52).

I think also that my conclusion advances Hilary Putnam's, following Roderick Firth's argument that if "epistemic values do enable us to correctly describe the world (or to describe it more correctly than any alternative set of epistemic values would lead us to do), that is something we see through the lenses of those very values. It does not mean that

those values admit an 'external' justification" (in Putnam, 33).

The works of social psychologist, Shalom Schwartz – in which are studied the content and structure of human values – may be considered a *de facto* scientific study of normativity. Specifically, his study looked at the universality of values of "value priorities of the individuals" in 20 culturally diverse countries ("Universals"). His study of the conflicts and compatibilities of human values postulates a structure of relations among the value types that he divided into 10 types ("Are There").

Objections and Replies

1) A very important dilemma in normativity is neglected here, both in defining the problem and in the proposed solution: is there only one unique normativity or are there many kinds of it, e.g., epistemic, moral and pragmatic?

Reply: No matter from which position that we choose to address this dilemma, this version of the problem and the proposed response remain valid. Although I think that normativity is unique, I guess no unresolvable problem will be caused if you limit normativity to one kind only – e.g., epistemic normativity – and reread this article through it.

2) OK, you are right: the problem exists. Appeal to BNIs is the only solution, and we could find them with a "scientific study" in a person or – if we were so fortunate – in a social group. Though these NIs are basic just now, they might not have been basic in the past, and they might not be so in the future. So the problem is solved only temporarily and may re-emerge at any time.

Reply: Yes, I agree, but the dream of a temporality-free solution to the problem of normativity is based on a circular version of the problem. So in my version, the problem emerges only temporarily, and thus temporal solutions are possible and valid. I think tomorrow's problem needs tomorrow's solution.

3) Your argument may have proven many necessary conditions for scientific

surveyability but not all of them. In defining normative concepts – e.g., ought, goal, value, and preference – another regress emerges. Is this latter problem scientifically surveyable as well?

Reply: The definitional problem, here, could be understood as two questions:

Are the normative concepts meaningful or not?

What is the specific meaning of any specific normative concept and how is it related to other concepts?

The first question is a philosophical

one. But at the present time, a “criterion of meaningfulness” faces strong criticisms. So the burden of proof lies on those who think that there is a problem of meaningfulness here. But the second question can be considered a scientific one. I talked about scientific surveyability without referring to any specific science; though pursuing BNIs may be a subject for social psychology, cultural or cognitive anthropology, etc., this question can be considered a subject for linguistics and its branches.

Notes

¹Although they talk about what they call “Intuition Driven Romantic strategies” (431-6), it seems to be true about all strategies that “all yield as outputs claims that putatively have normative force” (434).

²Christine Korsgaard, enumerating the questions like “Shall I believe? Is this perception really a *reason* to believe? [...] Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act?” believes that having these questions “sets us a problem no other animal has.” She calls this problem “the problem of the normative” (92-3). But it is not quite clear how she argues for calling these questions – even questions as difficult as these – “a problem.”

³The fact that we need a normative premise even to write about the problem of normativity recalls to us Putnam’s quip that “normativity is ubiquitous,” which itself is a ubiquitous quotation in philosophical writings on normativity.

⁴Following the coherentist project in epistemology, Linda Radzik proposed a similar idea to resolve the “regress problem” – which was defined by her in “A Normative Regress Problem,” following a similar problem in epistemology – in moral normative authority: “N will be justified if and only if it coheres well with the norms he accepts” (“Coherentist Theory,” 30). She supposes a normative force for justification on the other normative issues. But why we should accept that?

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