The philosophy of normativity or how to try clearing things up a little

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Normativity, one of the central themes of philosophy in the last decade,[1] represents a vast and fertile terrain of questions. The normative domain is frequently conceived in opposition to the descriptive, so that saying what *ought to be* or *ought to be done* is considered fundamentally different from saying what *is*. *Ought* is thus often considered the paradigmatic normative concept.[2] However, in general, it is admitted that the concepts of rule, value and virtue, but also reason, whether about the reason to act or to think, are normative in kind. Among these concepts, it is common to distinguish between, on the one hand, evaluative concepts (such as *good* and *bad*, but also *admirable* and *contemptible*, *just* and *unjust*, *benevolent* and *malevolent*, etc.) and, on the other, deontic concepts (such as *obligatory*, *permissible* and *forbidden*).[3] We should note that it is not clear that all normative concepts fall into one or other of these categories. For example, it could well be that the concept of reason constitutes a third normative category.

As the variety of normative terms shows, normative discourse plays a central role in our lives. And we accept that there are things that we *ought* or *ought not* to think, feel, desire, be, and of course, do. Such judgements are often the province of ethics. We thus think that we have certain moral duties, such as the duty to keep one's promises. It is this kind of norm that ethics (or moral philosophy) is concerned with. But normativity plays an essential role in many other areas of philosophy, particularly in philosophy of mind and epistemology.

Some questions about normativity are quite general. This is the case with the question of what constitutes normativity. According to a common conception, which Daniel Laurier advocates in his contribution to the present volume, normative judgements, or at least some of them, are distinguished by their intimate link to motivation; if someone judges that he ought to perform an action, he should be

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[1] For evidence of this, here are the titles of an impressive number of works that make direct reference to it: Dancy 2000; Copp 2001; Tappolet & Weinstock 2001; Schaber 2004; Wallace 2005; Hattiangadi 2007; Wedgwood 2007; Cuneo 2007; Thomson 2008; Robertson 2009; Greco 2010; De Caro & Macarthur 2010; as well as Korsgaard 1996, which one could say started a trend.

[2] The term 'norm' is borrowed from the Latin term *norma*, which means square, but also rule or law, and which itself is derived from the Greek, *gnomon*, which also means square.

[3] For the distinction between the evaluative and the deontic, see Ogien and Tappolet 2009 and Tappolet 2011.

motivated to perform it or run the risk of irrationality. As Laurier notes, this kind of conception, which is classed as *internalist*, has attracted plenty of adherents,[4] but it remains controversial. As a consequence, it is not clear that one can use it to distinguish the normative from the non-normative. Furthermore, the question arises whether it is possible to generalise the criterion of motivation to all judgements that we want to count as normative. When one says to an ergomaniac friend that she should take some leave, she will not necessarily be motivated as a result, far from it. And the same thing is true if a rule, even a law, requires the friend to take leave - we can imagine that she is an emergency doctor who has already done too many hours overtime. According to another conception, which we can trace back to John Stuart Mill[5] and which is proposed by Adam Morton in this volume, what marks out the normative domain is instead its link to sanctions, or more positively, to encouragement to conform to what is demanded. Far from supposing that normative judgement is accompanied in principle by the appropriate motivation, on the contrary, this thesis emphasises the possibility of a gap between what ought to be done or thought and what actually is done or thought.

Among the general questions to do with normativity, one can also think about whether normative judgements can be true or false or whether objective normative facts exist, for example. It is important to point out that some of these questions might admit of different answers depending on the domain under consideration. So it is not impossible that moral judgements are entirely objective and independent of all human conventions, but that this is not true of epistemological judgements. In fact, the rules of reasoning may, as Adam Morton underlines, depend partly on arbitrary conventions.

Other questions, however, are specific to particular domains. Thus the question of whether justification is normative is a central question in epistemology, while the question of whether attributions of mental states are normative, addressed in Daniel Laurier's and d'Asbjørn Steglich-Peterson's contributions, is at the heart of recent debates in philosophy of mind. Other questions relating to normativity are about what we ought to think, feel, imagine or do. It is this kind of question that is of interest in what is called normative or substantial ethics, which we often see as searching for the answers to what we ought to do. Yet substantial questions are also important in

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[4] Among those who subscribe to one form or another of internalism we find Hare (1952), Davidson (1986), Smith (1994), Korsgaard (1996) and Wedgwood (2007). On the externalist side, there is Railton (1986), Brink (1997), Copp (1997), Svavarsdottir (1999) and Shafer-Landau (2003).
[5] *Utilitarianism*, 1963, chap. 3.

aesthetics or in epistemology. We should note, moreover, that the most substantial considerations are not always centred around the deontic concept of ought. In fact, establishing which are the relevant values in a particular domain, as for example David Matheson's contribution attempts to do, could also be considered a normative enterprise, not least because of the link between the values in a domain and what one *ought* to think or do.

Normativity raises a host of interesting questions that have been the object of numerous debates. However, it has to be acknowledged that the contours of this area are still badly defined. To clear it up a little, it is useful to employ the carving-up tactic that is generally adopted in moral philosophy. Indeed, we divide the latter into several areas of questions: on the one hand, metaethical questions, such as the question of moral objectivity, and on the other, normative ethical questions, such as what we ought to do or what kind of character we ought to have. It is common to divide metaethics into several subdisciplines, such as moral ontology, moral semantics, moral epistemology and moral psychology.

In an analogous way, it seems useful to us to divide questions about normativity into five groups, corresponding to five subdisciplines:

a) *normative ontology*, which gathers together questions about the nature of normativity, its relation with the natural world as described by the sciences, as well as its relation to mental states and social conventions;

b) *normative semantics*, which aims to discover the meaning or more generally the function of normative statements;

c) *normative epistemology*, which concerns the question whether and how we can know normative facts, supposing that there are any, or also how we can have justified normative beliefs;

d) *normative psychology*, which, by analogy with moral psychology, deals with questions at the intersection of normative questions and psychology, and finally,

e) *substantial normative theory*, which tries to determine the relevant duties, values, but also virtues, whether generally or in a particular domain of application.

These five groups are not, of course, completely impenetrable in relation to one another; the answers that one gives to one or another of the questions in one of the groups will

have implications, or at least will be closely connected, with answers to questions in the other groups. Whatever it is like, a philosophy of normativity should, in principle, address all these kinds of questions in order to be complete.

The present volume is quite far from being an exhaustive answer to all these questions. Instead, it is composed of specific contributions to particular questions about normativity. The first three contributions are about questions that relate, by and large, to normative ontology. Their subject is not entirely general, since the first, Adam Morton's, is specifically about the status of rules of reasoning. Thus Morton emphasises that the norms of reasoning are partly determined by the fact that certain conventions are accepted. These conventions concern our attitudes of approbation or disapprobation towards our ways of doing.

Benoît Dubreuil's and Jessy Giroux's texts are about the nature of moral norms. Dubreuil questions the distinction commonly adopted between moral norms, such as 'One should not lie', and conventional norms, such as 'One should not lick one's plate'. According to Dubreuil, we should understand conventions as shared expectations, which, in a social context, determine the way in which we evaluate the interests at play and, incidentally, the presence and the gravity of wrongs. In this way, the opposition between conventional norms and moral norms can be replaced by a distinction between a) norms concerning harms that depend on expectations structured by a context, and b) norms concerning harms that do not manifest such dependence. For instance, the norm that says that one should not lick one's plate is distinguished from the norm forbidding lying by the fact that the former, but not the latter, forbids a 'contextual' harm, such as the disgust that such an action will no doubt arouse. Jessy Giroux, for his part, is interested in the origin of moral norms. He considers two principal options: one that says that norms are social constructions that our culture imposes on us, and one that says that norms are determined by our psychological dispositions. He proposes a conception that is meant to be a middle way, which he calls *moderate nativism*.

The next three articles are about mental normativity. Thus David Sosa, who does not hide his sympathy for Cartesian dualism, explores the dualist consequences of the thesis that being submitted to norms of rationality is distinctive of mental states and more generally of the mind. The thesis that mental states, or at least the attribution of these states, are normative is debated by Daniel Laurier and Asbjørn Steglich-Peterson, the former adopting a position in favour of this thesis, while the latter rejects it. The

principal difficulty that Laurier and Steglich-Peterson discuss lies with the widely accepted idea that the normative holds a relation of supervenience on the non-normative, in the rough sense that there cannot be a difference at the normative level without there being a difference at the non-normative level. According to a strong and metaphysical version of this thesis, normative facts are necessitated by non-normative facts.[6] The problem arises from the combination of the idea that this thesis is an *a priori* conceptual truth with the idea that mental states are essentially normative. In fact, if the thesis of mental normativity is also conceptual and *a priori*, one should conclude that the statement that mental states supervene on non-normative properties is also an *a priori* conceptual truth. The problem is that is surely not incoherent to argue for, as Sosa does, a Cartesian dualism that says that the mind is entirely independent of the natural and non-normative world.

The previous argument depends on the principle that can be traced back to David Hume[7] and that affirms that what *ought to be* must be distinguished from what *is*; a normative judgement cannot be inferred from a non-normative judgement and normative facts cannot be necessitated by non-normative facts. The 'is-ought' principle is so widely accepted that one could consider it an integral part of our concept of normativity. One could say the same for another famous principle, which is often traced back to Immanuel Kant,[8] which states that what we should do depends on what we are capable of doing. In other words, no one is required to do the impossible.

The principle 'ought implies can' is the subject of Thomas M. Besch's article. He questions the logical and normative interpretations of this principle that one finds in the literature and argues that we should distinguish between what an agent can or cannot do from the point of view of logical possibility and what she can or cannot do in a richer sense, which presupposes that some characteristics of the agent are considered required in order that she be held minimally competent to pursue the good. Thus, even if the link between what we ought to do and what we can do is a logical one, the determination of considerations that we think exonerate an agent can be seen as a normative and ethical enterprise.

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[6] See, among others, Sidgwick 1907; Moore 1922; Hare 1952, and Smith 1994.
[7] Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739-1740.
[8] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785.

The two last articles of this volume continue in the thrust towards substantial normative questions initiated by Besch. Thus, Martin Gibert and Mauro Rossi consider the question of how to determine which is the morally correct action. More specifically, they are interested in a common conception in virtue ethics that says that the right action is that which a virtuous agent would perform. The problem is that the person who poses this question is usually far from being virtuous. Gibert and Rossi discuss and reject several attempts to remedy this kind of problem. However, they suggest that even if we experience psychological resistance to imagining a virtuous person in certain circumstances, it is still not any less logically possible to determine what action she would perform. So it seems that, in the majority of cases, the objection against virtue ethics turns out to be more of an attempt to beg the question against that normative theory than a real threat.

David Matheson's article is also about substantial questions, but in epistemology rather than ethics. What is, or which are, the fundamental epistemic values? According to Matheson, we should embrace a form of value pluralism. There are three kinds of fundamental epistemic values: knowledge, true belief and justified belief. The article ends with the suggestion that the domain of ethics might be structured in the same way. Thus, there might be three kinds of fundamental ethical values: the benevolent actions dear to consequentialists, the actions performed with good intentions advocated by Kantians, and finally the morally correct actions, characterised by the fact that they can be identified with the first two kinds of actions. Clearly, one can doubt that consequentialists and Kantians will accept a pluralism of this sort, without forgetting virtue ethicists, who are more interested in what we are than in what we do. However, Matheson's proposal is interesting because he emphasises that substantial questions can cut across different domains of normativity.

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