

# The Normative and the Natural



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*for Jocelyn  
and  
for Lucy*



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# Introduction

We live in a world of “oughts”: you ought not lie, you ought to believe based on evidence, you ought to buy low and sell high. We are the sort of creatures we are because the world and our comportment to it matter to us. Whether we do well, think correctly, and do what is right are not things we can simply report with disinterest; they are affairs in which we feel the pull to engage and take responsibility for how we carry on. Our lives unfold within social spaces that are composed of lattices of norm-governed practices. We come to have stories of ourselves as individuals as we take up stances toward those practices, whether by endorsing them or resisting them. We embrace our roles as teachers, as artists, as parents (to name just a few); we take pride in work done well; we rail against injustice; we keep our promises (to name just a few). We thus find ourselves engaged in normative discourse, in which we overtly declare, question, command, and so on, how things are to be done and what is to be permitted, valued, or devalued.

But we also inhabit a natural world, one (seemingly) devoid of our institutions, values, and norms. In our encounter with the various phenomena of the natural world, we typically seek to explain them, and our most comprehensive and explanatorily powerful accounts of this world come from the natural sciences. We find ourselves embodied as biological organisms, composed of physical parts bound together by fundamental forces. By many estimates, the scope and power of these explanatory

approaches are so great as to render suspect anything that cannot be reconciled with them. We may broadly characterize such approaches as forms of naturalism. To be a naturalist in this sense is not to subscribe to a particular set of theories, but rather to a particular conception of our overarching intellectual project. We seek the most complete description of the world possible through scientific inquiry, and philosophy thus becomes an ancillary—perhaps even disposable—form of inquiry, serving science’s needs where possible, and adopting its results.

It has long been thought difficult to fit these “oughts” into a scientific world-view. For instance, moral wrongness is not something that science discovers in the world, nor is it something you can detect or measure in a laboratory. Or to borrow (and update) David Hume’s example, if you examine the scene of a wicked act, such as murder, you may discover much forensic evidence—fingerprints, bloodstains, tire tracks, and so on. But nowhere will you be able to find and catalog the wickedness or wrongness. We face a problem in placing the normative within the natural world, as some philosophers have put it. This problem is most apparent when we make normative claims with apparently declarative sentences (“Murder is wrong,” “This conclusion is unjustified”), which will be our primary focus in this work.

Implicit in this tension is an assumption that despite the “pull” that normative claims seem to have for us, they are, at some deeper level, descriptions of a different order of facts. Where we call something good, there would be some entity or property of goodness that made such claims true or false; where some claim or behavior is incorrect, there would be some standard to which it is held. If we assume there are such entities or properties, then we owe some scientifically respectable account of what they are and how they come to be. Many candidates have been offered—people’s preferences, their desires, their methods of belief formation, or something else. In this way, it is thought, “oughts” are just statements about the physical world, like any other statement. But many find these approaches deeply unsatisfying. Those who emphasize normative dimensions of human lives often find such surrogates pale imitations of normativity, while those who emphasize the importance of scientific explanation frequently see no reason to posit robust, full-blooded normativity at all.

How do we reconcile these very different dimensions of our lives and our world? One response from many philosophers amounts to a kind of shrug at the apparent tension. There are simply many different sorts of stories (or narratives, or practices, or discourses, or some similar philosophical device) that we tell in coping with our world, and there is no perspective from which to tell a “final story of all things”, nor a historical progression toward such a “final story.” To the degree that we still find some value in telling any such sort of story, we are free to adopt or abandon it accordingly. The most prominent advocate of such a response in recent decades was Richard Rorty, who repudiated the very idea that we should answer the world in a way that could motivate such a problem.

We must confess a certain sympathy with more nuanced versions of this response (though not much with Rorty’s in particular) in their emphasis on multiple parallel approaches to understanding ourselves and our world. But we must also confess that we feel the pull of many parts of contemporary naturalist accounts, and we are wary of solutions that insulate philosophy from scientific inquiry. Many contemporary naturalists have rightly pressed western philosophers on the presumption that there is a set of methods by which philosophy can be conducted prior to and independent of all other forms of inquiry. An important sense in which we think we ought to be naturalists is in thinking that no type of theoretical project—whether it is metaphysics, semantics, ontology, or most of all normativity—is conducted completely independently of the sort of open, world-involving engagement pursued in the natural sciences. We are especially apprehensive about approaches to normativity that add mysterious entities to the world to bear its explanatory load.

But why, we ask, can we not have both? Why not adopt approaches to philosophy that employ all the analytical sophistication and value-driven inquisitiveness we know and love, but which open their borders and weave those virtues in with the work we do in the natural sciences? Why not have both full-blooded normative discourse and some suitably moderate form of naturalism? The crucial sticking point remains the assumption that declarative assertions in normative discourse must describe (or somehow reveal) some deeper level of natural facts in addition to their action-guiding import, and this deeper level of natural facts simply cannot be placed in the world that naturalists describe. We will

argue that this assumption is fundamentally wrong. Normative claims do not aim, primarily, to describe; they urge us to do, or not do, something. Normative claims tell us that a state of affairs ought to be, or not be, a certain way.

With this in mind, we can pursue an alternative conception of normativity on which even its declarative statements are not stating facts. Indeed, they are not making descriptive claims at all. Rather, such discourse serves a fundamentally action-guiding role: it prescribes behavior (or proscribes it), or recommends a course of action (or recommends against it), and so on. We will show how normative claims are constrained by how the world, even though they do not describe this world. This constraint, combined with the availability of reasons and arguments for and against normative claims, also has the benefit of preventing a fall into relativism. If normative claims do not describe the world, then they cannot be describing the world in a way that conflicts with science. Thus, by abandoning the view that normative claims are in the business of describing the world, we will show how to reconcile the normative with natural science and a wealth of other forms of discourse.

## The Road from Here

In Chaps. 1 and 2, we note that there are many competing proposals for what sort of philosophical program the term “naturalism” should entail, and just how much authority its demands should have for contemporary philosophers. Rather than trying to sort through all of these competitors, we concentrate on a number of methodological themes that run through most self-identified naturalist accounts and explain why we have some degree of allegiance with each of them. However, the normative is an ineliminable part of our lives—including our scientific practices—and so it is important to give an account of the normative that comports with these naturalist themes.

In Chap. 3, we look at the prevailing views on how to place the properties of normative discourse in the physical world, that is, reductionism and non-reductive supervenience. We argue that contemporary reductionist accounts do not fall prey to the naturalistic fallacy, but even their

more sophisticated approaches leave us with a “normative surplus” that cannot be reduced or identified with any items in the physical world. Most importantly for our purposes, we see a common fault in such accounts of looking for some non-normative correlate to do the work of determining normative matters. We will argue that the very attempt to find such a correlate is misguided, as no correlate would do. This leads us to a discussion of deflationist accounts of truth and varieties of pluralism in Chap. 4.

In Chap. 5, we introduce a theoretical notion of an interest. We argue that interests are particularly important in understanding normative discourse as truth-apt and objective without appeal to normative objects and properties. Interests are matters impressed upon us by the world, rather than matters of assent and consensus. But they are not matters of representation of some feature of that world, so there is not even a purport to posit new entities that would vitiate naturalism. In Chap. 6, we use this to initiate a novel account of action-guiding content for elements of normative discourse. We contend that claims made in normative discourse are expressive of something quite different from familiar forms of descriptive discourse, but that this content is still something that we believe and something that can be true or false. In Chap. 7, we then offer an account of normative discourse that downplays its descriptive, fact-stating role. To do this, we build on work in Chaps. 5 and 6 to demonstrate how normative claims can be non-relatively true and then present an account of how the empirical can constrain the normative even if normative discourse does not serve a fact-stating role.

In Chap. 8, we return to a theme introduced in Chap. 4. There, we argued that even if we are committed to a non-reductionist account of normative discourse, among many others, this cannot commit us to “non-overlapping magisteria” of discourse in which the commitments we make for one sort of theoretical project are insulated from those of others. Taking cues from work in the philosophy of science, we argue that there is another alternative open to us. One “region” of discourse may be said to contribute to another in various theoretically fruitful ways. This has the virtue of unifying different regions of discourse, rather than insulating them from one another, in ways that avoid reductionism while being more conducive to the naturalist themes in Chap. 1. In Chap. 9, we build

on the theme of contribution from Chap. 8. Here, we argue that there are numerous ways in which normative discourse and non-normative discourse contribute to one another's projects in fruitful ways without either one reducing to the other.