

BOOK REVIEWS

Wedgwood, Ralph. *The Nature of Normativity*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 296. \$50.00 (cloth).

Ralph Wedgwood's *The Nature of Normativity* is an example of philosophy done in the grand, old-fashioned style of system building. In three hundred densely argued pages, Wedgwood's aim is to provide a theory of meaning for normative terms, a nonreductive account of normative properties, and an epistemology of normative belief. Indeed, this abstract description doesn't do full justice to the book's breadth: there are also forays into philosophy of mind, modal metaphysics, metaethics, and deontic logic, among other areas. This makes for a demanding read; rather few, I suspect, will be as well versed in all these areas as is Wedgwood, and he does not spare the readers the gritty details of the arguments. For some, breadth of this sort will also make for a frustrating read; philosophy of the system-building sort is not standard fare in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy and is certainly not to the taste of many. It would be a mistake, however, to allow one's aversion to philosophy in this style to stand in the way of appreciating this book. For Wedgwood's book is a bold and imaginative one, full of interesting arguments for controversial conclusions. There is a great deal to learn from it.

At the outset of his discussion, Wedgwood writes that "if the point of the book could be summed up in one sentence, that sentence would be: *the normativity of the intentional is the key to metaethics*" (2). By the "normativity of the intentional," Wedgwood has in mind the claim that an adequate account of intentional mental attitudes must refer to normative facts (174). Let me begin by offering an initial account of how this claim links the three parts of the book, which concern meaning, metaphysics, and epistemology, and then explore some of the details of Wedgwood's overarching argument.

Suppose we have the concept of the deliberative *ought*, the ought that wins out in (rational) practical deliberation. The meaning of this concept, Wedgwood maintains, is given by its conceptual or inferential role—the role it plays in deliberative thought. If Wedgwood is correct, an accurate description of this concept's conceptual role allows us to see that this concept picks out that property of a proposition p that makes it correct for an agent to incorporate p into his plans and incorrect to incorporate $\sim p$ into his plans (153). What makes a plan correct? According to Wedgwood, for a plan to be correct is for it to satisfy the ultimate purpose of all the standards of rationality that regulate planning, in particular standards of feasibility and choiceworthiness (101). Now we can see why, according to Wedgwood, the intentional is normative: an adequate account of the character of paradigmatic intentional states, such as plans, must refer to normative facts, such as those concerning choiceworthiness. So, if Wedgwood is right, there is a clear link between a conceptual role account of the meaning of *ought* and the claim that intentional attitudes are normative.

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Suppose the normative theory of intentional attitudes offers not merely a correct account of the nature these states but also illuminates what it is for a thinker to possess concepts of them. It follows, Wedgwood claims, that for a thinker to possess concepts of the various intentional attitudes, she must have dispositions that consist in an appropriate sort of sensitivity to the normative standards that concern their correct application. Consider the concept *admiration*, for example. As with planning concepts, for an agent to possess the concept *admiration*, she must be sensitive to the standards that regulate its correct application, such as that one's admiration is correct just in case its object really is admirable. Suppose we were to make the further assumption that these dispositions are reliable indicators of the truth of certain normative propositions concerning intentional attitudes, namely, those that "give the nature of these states" (235). Then an epistemology of normative belief is at hand. The manifestations of these dispositions are (or provide) intuitions on the basis of which we can arrive at reliably formed normative beliefs. "Facts about what one is disposed to admire," Wedgwood writes, function "as evidence for what it is correct for one to admire" (240).

I noted a few paragraphs back that, according to Wedgwood, the point of his book could be summarized by the claim that the normativity of the intentional is the key to metaethics. There is certainly a sense in which this slogan illuminates Wedgwood's overall enterprise. But I should also indicate why it is a little misleading.

First, Wedgwood's book is not about metaethics. To be sure, it has implications for metaethics, but Wedgwood devotes almost no attention to these implications, instead concerning himself with normativity more broadly understood, especially with what I've referred to as the deliberative ought. Moreover, the thesis that the intentional is normative plays no essential part in his argument for a nonreductive account of normative properties (about which I will have more to say in a moment). On the assumption that a nonreductionist moral ontology lies at the heart of the type of metaethical view that Wedgwood would wish to defend, Wedgwood's one-sentence summary probably overstates the importance of the normativity of the intentional for metaethics.

That noted, let me now unpack some of the details of Wedgwood's overall project.

In the first part of the book, Wedgwood defends a version of motivational internalism with respect to judgments concerning the deliberative ought. According to this view, all instances of the schema "(1) Necessarily, if one is rational, then, if one judges 'I ought to x', one also intends to x" are true (see 25). According to Wedgwood, this has important implications for a theory of meaning regarding normative terms. It implies, first, that causal theories of meaning, defended by the so-called Cornell realists, according to whom the semantic value (or referent) of a normative term is determined by its standing in some type of causal relation to a normative property, are false. Moreover, it implies that conceptual analysis accounts of meaning, defended by the so-called Canberra Planners, such as Michael Smith, according to whom the semantic value of a term is determined by a range of platitudes that provide an implicit definition of the term, are false. In both cases, Wedgwood argues, there is no explanation as to

why schema (1) should hold—the assumption being that any adequate view about the meaning of normative terms should provide such an explanation.

Is a better option regarding the meaning of normative terms available? According to Wedgwood, yes. The key is to attend to the distinctive role that normative concepts play in deliberation. Drawing upon recent work in conceptual role semantics, Wedgwood maintains that the semantic value of the concept *ought* is fixed by the role it plays in normative thought. More specifically, Wedgwood defends a cognitivist variant of a view defended by Allan Gibbard in *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), which says that acceptance of the first-person proposition *that I ought to p at t*—where “t” refers to some time in the present or near future—commits one to making *p* part of one’s ideal plan about what to do at *t* (see 97). To understand this principle fully, we would have to explore in more detail the notions *being a plan*, *being an ideal plan*, and so forth. Still, even a basic grasp of this principle should allow us to see Wedgwood’s thought: a conceptual role account of the meaning of *ought* that incorporates this principle provides an adequate explanation of normative judgment internalism. For “it is clear that first-person judgments involving this concept [namely, *ought*] will be essentially connected to practical reasoning and the formation of plans and intentions to act” (97) in the way that schema (1) specifies.

In the second part of the book, Wedgwood defends an account of normative properties according to which they are both irreducible and causally efficacious. The argument for irreducibility is complex. Stated in skeletal form, the argument is this: any attempt to reduce normative properties to natural ones hinges on the claim that the strong supervenience of the normative on the natural entails the following global supervenience claim: namely, that any two worlds indiscernible with respect to their natural properties are also indiscernible with respect to their normative properties. A defense of the claim that strong supervenience entails global supervenience, however, rests on the assumption, definitive of S5 modal logic, that if something is possible, then it is necessarily possible. Wedgwood contends that we should reject this assumption, believing instead that possibility and necessity are world relative. According to Wedgwood’s position, contingent facts about a world can determine whether some other world counts as a possible world (relative to the first world). If Wedgwood is correct about this, then any attempt to reduce normative properties to natural ones must fail. Normative properties are realized in natural properties but are not reducible to them.

Nonreductionism is often married to the position that normative properties are causally inefficacious. Wedgwood strikes out in a different direction, maintaining that if the intentional is normative, then the normative is causal. The claim here is that for one to possess a concept of a given intentional attitude is for one to have dispositions to apply the concept correctly. These dispositions, however, are normative, for “an essentially rational disposition must be sensitive to the presence or absence of defeating conditions as such” (184). That is, such a disposition must be sensitive to conditions that would normally make it rational to revise one’s attitudes in certain ways. But the notion of a disposition, says Wedgwood, is itself causal. This is because a disposition is something that causally responds to one or another stimulus condition. In the case of an “essentially

rational" disposition, however, the type of stimulus condition in question is a normative fact that makes it rational to revise our attitudes in certain ways (184).

In the third and final part of the book, Wedgwood turns to epistemological matters. Earlier I pointed out that, according to his view, the manifestation of "essentially rational" dispositions functions as evidence for normative propositionalism. Wedgwood adds that this position vindicates a type of a priorist intuitionism. The relevant intuitions, in his view, include the manifestation of dispositions that are essential to either possessing a concept (e.g., *being yellow*) or to being capable of a type of attitude (e.g., belief). These intuitions, moreover, are a priori, at least in an extended, Kantian sense. For, according to the Kantian view, the a priori is what our relevant cognitive capacities "supply out of themselves" or what is "built into" them (253). Since these capacities include, in Wedgwood's view, our possession of various concepts, the resulting position satisfies the Kantian description.

Intuitionist positions, according to their critics, have great difficulty handling various skeptical challenges, such as how our normative beliefs could be rational in conditions in which there is substantial disagreement about normative issues. Wedgwood believes that challenges such as this can be met. The key is to allow for a type of "egocentric bias," according to which (all else being equal), in cases of disagreement, one is entitled to grant one's own normative intuitions the benefit of the doubt.

When we hold up the various elements of Wedgwood's position, the following pattern emerges: it advances three views properly described as internalist. It defends a robust form of motivational internalism, according to which there is a necessary, internal connection between normative judgment and intention to act. It champions an internalist account of meaning inasmuch as the semantic value of normative terms "depends purely on their inner conceptual role, not on any contingent facts between the thinker and his environment" (249–50). Finally, it advocates a species of epistemic internalism, according to which whether or not it is rational for a thinker to believe a proposition is always determined purely by the facts that are in some way "internal" to the thinker's mind (see 228). Imagine that this package of claims were incorporated into a metaethical position. Then there would be a clear sense in which it would stand at odds with naturalistic, Cornell-style positions in metaethics, which are externalist in nearly every respect. While I sympathize with much of what Wedgwood claims, especially the nonreductive normative ontology that he defends, let me close by raising the question of what someone with externalist sympathies might say in response to some of the central moves made in Wedgwood's book, especially those regarding meaning.

Recall that Wedgwood furnishes an argument for his favored account of meaning that hinges on the assumption that any decent position about meaning should account for why all the instances of the schema "(1) Necessarily, if one is rational, then, if one judges 'I ought to x', one also intends to x" are true. If Wedgwood is correct, a Cornell-style, causal account of reference cannot explain this. Wedgwood writes: "How can the mere fact that judgments involving a given concept are responses to the ought relation be enough to explain why anyone who possesses this concept must be disposed to be motivated to act by their first-person judgments involving this concept?" (63). We could easily imagine

beings whose judgments reliably causally track the ought relation but “have absolutely no tendency to motivate them to act accordingly” (63). This gives us good reason, says Wedgwood, to believe that causal theories are going to have a difficult time accounting for why motivational internalism of the sort expressed by schema (1) is true.

Suppose, for argument's sake, we grant that someone sympathetic with Cornell-style semantics should grant that all instances of schema (1) are true. What should a proponent of such a position say in response to Wedgwood's argument? Three things, I think.

First, fundamental to Wedgwood's argument is the assumption that a theory of reference should explain why all the instances of schema (1) are true. This, however, is a lot to ask of a theory of reference. Arguably, the job of such a theory is to account for how it is that we get a cognitive grip on normative properties sufficient for our being able to form various types of predicative thoughts in which they feature as a component. No doubt such a view should be compatible with (1). But it is not at all apparent that it should have to explain why all the instances of (1) are true. Something else, after all, may do the explaining.

Second, contrary to Wedgwood's suggestion, I would think that a Cornell-style theorist would deny that she ever meant to claim that an agent's standing in some type of causal relation to the ought relation is itself sufficient to explain why she is appropriately motivated. Schema (1), after all, tells us that it is rational agents who are motivated appropriately by their normative judgments. This naturally suggests a view according to which it is not simply an agent's bearing a causal relation to normative properties but something about the kind and degree of rationality she exhibits that secures the necessary connection.

Third, it is now open to the Cornell-style theorist to tell the requisite story about why she, as a semantic externalist, can offer an account of why all the instances of schema (1) are true. One story might go something like the following: all properly functioning human beings have the capacity to form normative judgments. To rationally form a normative judgment that one ought to perform a given action is to see that the action is called for, on pain of being practically irrational. Accordingly, were an agent to judge that she ought to perform that action and fail to form the relevant intention, then she would suffer from a rational defect. Perhaps some breakdown has occurred between her cognitive and motivational systems that results in the lack of motivation. Or, somewhat differently, perhaps being rational in the requisite sense requires exhibiting a high degree of mastery of normative concepts. If so, we can grant that it is possible for there to be creatures whose judgments reliably causally track the ought relation but “have absolutely no tendency to motivate them to act accordingly.” In such a case, these agents fail to exhibit the requisite mastery of the concept necessary for being rational in the sense specified by schema (1). Once again, however, the account of concept mastery needn't be one that explains how we gain a cognitive grip on the ought relation in the first place. To explain that, we offer the semantic externalist's causal story—a story, I might add, that can draw upon Wedgwood's own arguments for the causal efficacy of normative features.

I have claimed that normative realists can accept the combination of se-

mantic externalism and motivational internalism, sketching how Cornell-style realists might respond to Wedgwood's argument against their view. To be sure, the objection raised does not settle the debate between Wedgwood and the Cornell-style realists, as the latter may have to borrow significantly from conceptual role semantics when replying to Wedgwood's concerns. However that may be, let me close by emphasizing what I hope is evident: *The Nature of Normativity* is a rich and provocative book, well worth reading.

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