Practical Cognitivism: An Essay on Normative Judgment

A dissertation presented

by

Douglas Ray Kremm

to

The Philosophy Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Philosophy

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

August 2018
Practical Cognitivism: An Essay on Normative Judgment

Abstract

This dissertation aims to recover two key insights that have animated the so-called “non-cognitivist” tradition in ethics – insights that have been continually distorted and obscured through attempts to express them in a theoretical framework that cannot accommodate them. The two key insights are, first, that ethical thinking is fundamentally practical in a way that rules out a substantially representationalist account of such thinking, and, second, that purely ontological questions about the nature and existence of certain sorts of entities (e.g., ethical properties and facts) are irrelevant to concerns about the objectivity of ethics. When properly understood, these ideas point toward a distinctive kind of metaethical view that I call ‘practical cognitivism’. This view understands ethical practice as the product of a distinctively practical kind of cognition, which we engage in by considering, adopting, rejecting, and carrying out practical commitments. Understanding ethical practice in this way allows us to place ethics in the natural world without distorting or undermining it, and it sheds light on a variety of phenomena that are of central importance to moral philosophy, such as normative guidance, akrasia, and the place of the emotions in ethical life.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. iii

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................. v

Dedication ................................................................................................................ viii

Preface ..................................................................................................................... ix

1. Two Kinds of Cognitivism .................................................................................. 1

2. Practical Questions and Practical Commitments ............................................. 56

3. Motivation, Practicality, and Residual Questions .......................................... 78

4. Agency and Akrasia .......................................................................................... 103

5. Practical Correctness ......................................................................................... 128

6. Metaethical Quietism ......................................................................................... 173

Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 203
Acknowledgments

One of the things I learned from writing this dissertation was just how often the written word falls short of expressing what one wants to say. (I ended up cutting the chapter discussing this, which seems somehow appropriate.) I came to a new appreciation of this fact as I sat down to write these acknowledgements. These brief words will not begin to express the depth of gratitude that I feel when I think back on all the people who have helped me see this project through to its completion. But let me give it a try.

Christine Korsgaard has been an amazing teacher, advisor, and mentor. She modeled for me the way that I would like to see philosophy done. Her passion for the subject gripped me from day one, and I thank her for never letting me lose sight of what really matters. She has an uncanny ability to see right to the heart of things, and she taught me to always ask why a philosophical question was important before trying to answer it. Her questions and conversations made me into the philosopher I am today, and I will be forever grateful for that.

Selim Berker has been an invaluable resource since my first year at Harvard when he taught me the value of precision and thoroughness in philosophical thinking. He was also enormously helpful over the years in discussing expressivism and other issues in metaethics with me. His enthusiasm for philosophy was contagious, and his love for getting the history right is a big part of what encouraged me to make a careful study of the early non-cognitivists. I’ve spent many hours poring over his extremely detailed handwritten comments, and I’ve benefited greatly from doing so. If there are any remaining typos, ambiguities, or inconsistencies in this dissertation, I blame him for not catching them earlier and presenting me with his top 7.5 options for how to resolve them.
Derek Parfit was extremely generous in reading and commenting on my work. It is a testament to his kindness and his skill as a mentor that I always looked forward to reading his comments, despite knowing that he would disagree with nearly everything I had written. When I first met with Derek to discuss my second-year paper (of which this dissertation is a descendant), his first response was, “What you call ‘practical cognitivism’ is not deserving of the name.” I don’t know that I ever convinced him otherwise, but that never stopped him from being an unwavering source of support and encouragement. I miss him deeply and will be forever thankful for the time I was able to share with him.

Allan Gibbard was responsible for my conversion to the dark side (i.e., to expressivism), though I don’t hold him responsible for any of the slander I endured upon making that conversion. I first read his book, *Thinking How to Live*, in my second year of graduate school, thinking that I would write a quick paper showing why he was wrong and then move on. It was in the course of trying (and failing) to write that paper that I came to appreciate the attractions of his way of approaching metaethical questions. His profound influence on my thinking will be evident to anyone familiar with his work, and I am very grateful to have been able to work with such a kind and patient thinker. I also want to thank him for all the time he took to discuss philosophy with me during my visits to Michigan.

I would also like to thank the faculty and graduate students in the Harvard Philosophy Department for creating such a unique and stimulating environment in which to pursue philosophy. Before coming to Harvard, I had to fund my sporadic intellectual pursuits by working as a record-fast burger flipper at McDonald’s, a hapless malingerer at a steel factory, an apathetic clerk at a dollar store, a berated phone salesman at a water company, an ill-equipped and under-trained manager at a cafeteria, and more. It wasn’t until I got to graduate school that I felt the great joy of
being able to spend long, uninterrupted hours reading and writing about the things I loved. I am extremely grateful to everyone in the Harvard community who helped make that possible.

Special thanks to Mark Richard for discussing expressivism and philosophy of language with me, and for the work he put into understanding and criticizing my second-year paper; to Tim Scanlon, for his helpful comments during the M&P Workshop, and for discussing cognitivism, quietism, and Hare with me; to Olivia Bailey and Zeynep Soysal, who were my two best philosophy friends since we arrived at Harvard together in 2010, who discussed everything with me from start to finish, and without whom I would have likely finished this dissertation two years earlier; to Arden Ali, whose friendship and philosophy have helped me enormously since we first met as undergraduates at the University of Pittsburgh; to Sandy Diehl, whose patience and perceptiveness helped me far more than he knows; to Marc Gasser-Wingate, for his friendship, his conversation, and his martial discipline during our many, many work sessions in Robbins Library; to Rachel Achs, James Bondarchuk, Lauren Davidson, Jeremy Fix, Paul Marcucilli, Ronni Gura Sadovsky, Wendy Salkin, Aleksey Tarasenko-Struc, and Kate Vredenburgh for many insightful comments and discussions; and to the members of the Harvard Workshop in Moral and Political Philosophy for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of my work.

And thank you, finally, to Angie King, for being an endless source of love and support, for helping me untangle my thoughts and get them on the page when I was feeling lost and discouraged, and for inspiring me to do my best work and to be my best self.
For my teenage self,

Who didn’t do his homework and thought that nothing mattered.
Preface

Let me start with a confession. This dissertation does not answer the questions that it originally set out to answer. (I suppose that is probably true of many dissertations.) Those questions were big ones: Why should we care about ethics? Why is it important? What can we say to the person who just doesn’t seem to care? The closest I come to addressing such questions is in the final two chapters, where I try to show that a certain way of thinking about ethics does not preclude us from giving positive answers to them. For the most part, though, the dissertation focuses on questions that are in some sense prior to these. What is the nature of ethical judgment? What sort of thought are we having when we judge that people ought to behave in a certain way? And what would it take for judgments like that to be correct or incorrect? The dissertation is mainly an attempt to defend a particular way of thinking about these prior issues; it is an attempt to develop an understanding of what ethics is that can help us to think more clearly about why ethics matters.

I did, in fact, come to have positive views about the “big questions” as I worked through the issues discussed in this dissertation. Aside from the usual constraints of time, space, ability, and so forth, there are two main reasons why I did not end up discussing these views in what follows. One reason is that I do not think that questions about the significance of ethics – at least not in the form in which such questions had originally gripped me – admit of a single, definitive answer, or that they can be adequately addressed by a one-size-fits-all argument. There are all sorts of interesting (and true!) things one can say about why ethics matters. We couldn’t get along without it. We have no choice but to uphold some ethical standards and resist others. We couldn’t coherently reject all ethical standards and still go on living a remotely human life. Being ethical is a way of responding to the legitimate needs and interests of other people, who are just as real and just as important as you are. Being ethical makes us happy. It helps us grow and mature into
responsible, stable human beings, and it fosters relations of mutual trust which are essential for the flourishing of social creatures like us. All of these things seem to me true and important, and each of them could be emphasized to good effect in different conversational settings. Which facts one ought to emphasize – and how in particular one ought to emphasize them – will depend on the specific concerns of the person one is addressing, and these will vary from person to person. I do not believe (and this is my second reason for not trying to address these issues in the context of a dissertation) that there is any kind of general, all-purpose “ethical skeptic” to whom we must be responsive in our thinking about why ethics is important, or why it is worth taking seriously. The person to whom one must be responsive in such thinking is ultimately oneself, and how much one needs to say will depend on why one feels the need to say anything in the first place; it will depend on why one feels the need to ask for a vindication of ethics, and this will again vary from person to person. There is no one-size-fits-all “vindication” of ethics; there are specific vindications that can be given in specific contexts to specific people.

In my own case, I have to confess that the big questions were, for me, rooted partly in a certain kind of immaturity and selfishness, and also partly in a distorted and misleading way of thinking about ethics. The former did not seem to me worth addressing in the dissertation, since I had to write for an audience that was in some sense general and abstract, and since these issues were very particular to my own situation. The latter, though – the fact that my concerns about ethics were partly rooted in a distorted conception of what ethics was – did seem to me worth addressing, since I think the misconceptions I had were (and are) widely shared by other philosophers working on these issues. Much of what I do in in the dissertation, then, is an attempt to clear up various misconceptions about what ethics is, or about what it must be in order for it to
have the kind of significance we ordinarily take it to have, and to develop alternatives that we can put in their place.

Before I began working on these issues, I had tended to assume something along these lines: if ethics is to be fully legitimate, there must be such things as objective ethical truths; in order for there to be such truths, the world must be a certain way; and there are serious challenges to thinking that the world really is that way. This sort of thought is, I believe, widely shared among philosophers, although not everyone would express it in quite this way. What I had failed to notice was that this general thought depends upon a particular way of thinking about ethics, one that is wholly optional and, on reflection, I think, not particularly compelling. The thought assumes that ethical thinking is a matter of trying to form accurate representations of the world, and hence that the idea of “ethical truth” must be understood in terms of the world being or not being a certain way. Much of the work in the dissertation is an attempt to challenge this way of thinking about ethics.

In order to do that, I found that I had to work outside the standard terminology that frames much of the discussion in contemporary metaethics. That terminology is just too fraught with presuppositions that lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding. One of the benefits I gained from trying (and failing!) to argue against the expressivist program of Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard was that I came to appreciate this first-hand. There was a time when I was, like many philosophers, deeply skeptical of the expressivist program in metaethics, particularly when we got to the point of “quasi-realism.” Like many others, I had a kind of allergy to the very mention of quasi-realism; I saw it as a weaselly kind of maneuvering, a technical cleverness that never got around (and never would get around) to addressing the real issues. And I had somehow come to believe this before I had ever seriously read any of the quasi-realists’ work. This was an attitude
that I had simply absorbed from the philosophical culture, because of the way the view was standardly presented and discussed, and because of the position the view occupied within the framework of contemporary metaethics. It was (I knew) a kind of skepticism, a sort of last resort that was only to be defended if the truly attractive positions – the more “robustly realist” ones – could not be made to work.

It is interesting to me how different everything looked once I had finally understood what the quasi-realists and their non-cognitivist predecessors were trying to say. I saw Hare’s and Blackburn’s exasperated insistence that they are not skeptics in a new light. I saw Gibbard’s changes of mind not as a convenient backtracking or watering-down of his original position, but as a proper development of the original insights that were motivating him all along. I saw the Ayer of Language, Truth and Logic as a naïve and over-zealous 24-year-old who made some gross missteps that plagued him for the rest of his life. And I began to notice immediately – without having to think about it, in the way that one can sometimes tell immediately that one’s own speech is failing to have its intended effect – all of the subtle ways in which these philosophers’ views were constantly being misunderstood and misrepresented. I began to see how all of this came together to make the quasi-realists’ project “smell of sulphur” (as Blackburn once put it), and how this prevented us from understanding and developing some of their core ideas – ideas that seemed to me interesting and promising.¹

This led me to spend a good deal of time reflecting on the way that philosophical issues are framed and presented, and how different ways of doing this can work to the advantage or

¹ The Blackburn quotation comes from (Blackburn 1998: vi). To be sure, the problems I am describing here are not, I think, entirely the fault of those who oppose quasi-realism and non-cognitivism. The quasi-realists and non-cognitivists themselves are partly at fault here as well; as I explain in Chapter 1, I do not think that these philosophers always had the best version of their position clearly in view, and I think that they themselves were often influenced by the very ways of thinking that make their central ideas so difficult to see and to articulate.
disadvantage of different philosophical positions. Relatedly, I spent a good deal of time thinking about how certain views and attitudes become entrenched in philosophical terminology that masquerades as neutral, and how this can unintentionally (and unwittingly) constrain our philosophical thinking. Eventually I came to think that if there was any hope in salvaging the ideas in the expressivist tradition that I found interesting and promising, they would have to be cast in a new terminology, and the surrounding theoretical framework would need to be replaced with one that allowed us to formulate the central issues in a clearer and more neutral way.

That is, in effect, the aim of Chapter 1. I argue in that chapter that we can begin to make progress here by rejecting a widely held assumption about cognitive attitudes that underlies much of the discussion in contemporary metaethics: the assumption, namely, that cognitive attitudes are essentially mental states that aim to represent the world in some substantial sense. Instead, I argue, we should think of cognitive attitudes as mental states that aim to answer a certain kind of question. We can then distinguish between two philosophically interesting kinds of cognitivism: theoretical and practical. The theoretical cognitivist understands ethical inquiry as an attempt to answer certain sorts of representational questions, whereas the practical cognitivist understands such inquiry as an attempt to answer questions that are *irreducibly practical*. The non-cognitivist tradition, I then suggest, can be fruitfully understood as working toward a kind of practical cognitivism.

Chapters 2 through 4 then develop the central idea behind practical cognitivism by focusing on the notion of a practical commitment, which I explain in terms of our capacity to engage in a strong form of reflective agency. We engage in strong reflective agency to the extent that we act with clear understanding of what we are doing and why, and to the extent that we can fully stand behind what we do. Practical commitments are mental states whose function is to facilitate this
kind of reflective agency, in part by regulating the functioning of other, less reflective motivational states, and in part by unifying us as agents across time. Normative judgments, according to practical cognitivism, are expressions of this kind of practical commitment. I argue in Chapter 3 that this view best explains how normative judgments are capable of playing their characteristic role in practical deliberation, which is to settle where the agent stands on practical matters of what to do. I then argue, in Chapter 4, that this view makes good sense of akrasia, or weakness of the will.

In the final two chapters of the dissertation I turn to questions of correctness and objectivity. In Chapter 5, I argue, in effect, that normative judgments are the kinds of things that can be correct or incorrect. In Chapter 6 I try to show that we don’t need a distinctively ontological or metaphysical vindication of our ethical or normative commitments. The position we are left with in the end is, I think, an attractive one. We have a view of ethics that preserves its practical significance without committing us to controversial metaphysical claims about the ultimate nature of reality. If there are remaining concerns about the status or legitimacy of ethics, they can be addressed in a piecemeal fashion, by engaging in normative reflection about what matters and why. I leave the task of carrying out such reflection for a separate occasion; the aim of this dissertation is just to bring you to that last step.
Chapter 1

Two Kinds of Cognitivism

1.1 Introduction

Much of the discussion in contemporary metaethics takes place against the backdrop of a distinction between *cognitivism* and *non-cognitivism*. Cognitivism is generally characterized as the view that normative judgments express cognitive attitudes, and non-cognitivism is generally characterized as the denial of that view.¹

But what are cognitive attitudes? They’re often described as being “belief-like,” but that’s not very helpful. Belief-like in what ways? The usual proposals are things like this: they’re the sorts of things that can be true or false; they’re the sorts of things that could constitute knowledge (under the right conditions); they’re the sorts of things that enter into relations of consistency and inconsistency, and are thus governed, in some sense, by the laws of logic; they’re the sorts of things that can figure in genuine disagreements; and so on. Cognitivism, then, is the view that normative judgments express attitudes that have these various cognitive desiderata (truth-aptness, knowledge-aptness, and so on), and non-cognitivism is the denial of that view.²

---

¹ Two quick terminological points. First, I use ‘judgment’ to refer to a mental or linguistic act or event that typically expresses or partly constitutes an agent’s underlying propositional attitudes (so that, e.g., the judgment that snow is white is a kind of mental or linguistic affirmation of the content <Snow is white>, which typically expresses or partly constitutes an agent’s underlying belief that snow is white). Second, I occasionally use ‘ethical’, ‘moral’, and ‘normative’ interchangeably. The distinctions between these domains are important in certain contexts, but for the purposes of this discussion they can all be treated together.

² There is no single, standard way of characterizing the cognitivism/non-cognitivism distinction. Here and in Section 2 I am bringing together a number of different characterizations, all of which are quite prominent in the literature, in order to talk about the distinction in a general way. I have chosen to leave out talk of ‘representation’ and ‘facts’ in my characterization at this early stage of the discussion; these notions receive their own treatment below (Section 3), and introducing them at this stage would over-complicate things.
I don’t think this is a very useful distinction. Many philosophers seem to be aware of that, at least on some level, since they often admit that a characterization of non-cognitivism like the one just described is inadequate. But it is generally assumed that the reasons why that characterization is inadequate have to do with minor complications arising from the so-called “quasi-realist” project of Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard (Blackburn 1993, 1998; Gibbard 2003, 2012). On the usual way of understanding that project, the quasi-realist (or the expressivist) “starts off” holding something like the non-cognitivist view just described – i.e., he starts off holding that normative judgments are not truth-apt, or not knowledge-apt, or whatever – and then he tries to show that there is nevertheless a legitimate sense in which, “at the end of the day,” we can use the language of truth, knowledge, etc., when engaging in normative practice. This way of thinking leaves the basic distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism intact. Indeed, it relies upon that very distinction to characterize the quasi-realist project. Quasi-realism is understood, on this way of thinking, as an attempt to hold on to “early non-cognitivism” while still preserving the surface features of normative thought and talk. That makes it more complicated to characterize the view, since the quasi-realist will insist that he does think that normative judgments can be true or false (in a sense). But while these complications make the view harder to describe, they do not really threaten the original distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. If we wanted to, we could build these complications into our characterization of non-cognitivism, and there would be no cause for complaint. Or so the thought goes.

I think there are much deeper problems with the cognitivism/non-cognitivism distinction, and that they can’t be written off as minor details. It distorts our understanding of the history of metaethics, and as a result it distorts our understanding of certain positions in contemporary debates (e.g., quasi-realism, but also other cognitivist positions as well). It reinforces certain
theoretical biases about the nature of cognition (and hence about the nature of the various features, such as truth-aptness and knowledge-aptness, that are supposed to qualify some attitude or judgment as being “cognitive”). And it obscures important issues, and important possibilities, that ought to have a more central place in our metaethical theorizing. The overarching aim of this chapter is to substantiate these criticisms of the cognitivism/non-cognitivism distinction, and to begin correcting for some of the distortions to which that distinction has given rise.

Before I launch into that discussion, let me first say a bit more about why I think it matters. First, it matters, to me, for broadly pragmatic reasons. The view that I want to defend in this dissertation shares important affinities with the view that people call ‘quasi-realist expressivism’, and it draws on what I take to be some important insights contained in the so-called “non-cognitivist” tradition. But these views are widely misunderstood, and they’re often subject to dismissal on the basis of objections that stem from these misunderstandings. It’s important for me to clear up these misunderstandings so that they don’t transfer over to the view I’m trying to defend.

Second, I think that terminology is important in philosophy, and that it often does more work than we’d like to admit. Different ways of carving up theoretical space encode different views about what’s philosophically interesting, what’s puzzling or potentially problematic, what’s “clear” or “straightforward” and what isn’t, what sorts of things need explanation, what sorts of things count as explanations, and so on; and all of this is reflected in our use of philosophical “-isms.” In talking about our use of philosophical “-isms,” I don’t just mean to be talking about the words we choose as names for philosophical views. I mean to be talking about all of the things we say and do that invest those names with significance: the way that we introduce the views, the way we describe their motivations, their dialectical responsibilities, their commitments, their
challenges, and their aspirations; the way we characterize what’s at stake in determining whether
they’re true; and so on – in short, all of the things that are supposed to bring us from some pre-
theoretical puzzle or question or concern into the domain of philosophical debate where these “-
isms” stake their claims. A lot of philosophical work takes place behind the scenes when we do
these things, and often in ways that are difficult to detect. When this sort of thing becomes deeply
ingrained in our terminology, it can make it difficult even to say the things that one wants to say,
or at least to say them without being misunderstood. I think that this has been going on for a long
time in metaethics, and that it has made it difficult to understand what the philosophers in the non-
cognitivist tradition have been up to.³ And that seems like something that’s worth clearing up.

Finally, I think there are interesting reasons why the familiar distinction between
cognitivism and non-cognitivism has had such a central place in our thinking over the past hundred
years or so, despite its obvious inadequacies, and that seeing what these reasons are will put us in
a better position to understand what’s at stake in the debate between the so-called “non-
cognitivists” and their opponents. It is a curious fact about this area of philosophy that so many
people have simply ignored much of what the non-cognitivists have said when characterizing their
own position. Everyone agrees that the term ‘non-cognitivism’ is supposed to be the name of a
certain kind of theory that’s been developed over the years by philosophers such as A. J. Ayer, C.
L. Stevenson, R. M. Hare, Simon Blackburn, and Allan Gibbard,⁴ and yet most of those

---

³ I think this is why most of the so-called “non-cognitivists” explicitly reject that label as misleading (see the next
paragraph). I also think it’s why Blackburn now regrets having introduced the term ‘quasi-realism’ into philosophy in
the first place (Blackburn 2010: 1-2, 178-9); (Blackburn 2015: xvii). Gibbard (1996) suggested that ‘sophisticated
realism’ would be a better name for the sort of project he and Blackburn are engaged in, but unfortunately that
suggestion never stuck. If it had, people probably would not have published papers with titles like “Sophisticated
Realism is Fictionalism” (cf. David Lewis’s article, “Quasi-Realism Is Fictionalism” (Lewis 2005)), nor would they
have been so concerned about whether sophisticated realism “ends up looking too much like realism.”

⁴ See for example the following statement in Mark Schroeder’s book, Noncognitivism in Ethics, which is characteristic
of the literature more generally: “[T]he word [‘noncognitivism’] is used differently by different people. But one thing
that people generally agree on, is who counts as a noncognitivist. It is agreed by most philosophers that the theories
philosophers have explicitly rejected that name as misleading. Hare hated the term, and he frequently said that we ought to stop using it altogether for the sake of clarity. Blackburn says that he has “for many years strenuously opposed the label.” Gibbard says that all of the “touchstones” of cognitivism are things that he accepts, and that the real issues lie elsewhere. Even Stevenson was speaking of “the so-called noncognitive view” in scare quotes by 1962. And this is not a mere terminological preference. As we’ll see below, most of the theses that are commonly attributed to these philosophers, qua non-cognitivists, are things that they have explicitly rejected in print.

I find this very puzzling. The explanation cannot just be that no one has ever bothered to read the non-cognitivists. There has to be something deeper going on. What’s going on, I think, is that people read these remarks and feel entitled to discount them. They think that they’re a kind of trick (as in the case of the quasi-realist), or that they can be safely ignored, since (the thought goes) the non-cognitivists have to accept something like the familiar characterization of their view, in order for their view to be interestingly distinct from “ordinary cognitivism.” I believe that this attitude reflects a kind of theoretical blind-spot, one that makes it difficult to see how the non-cognitivists might be arguing for something that is interestingly distinct – that is to say, distinct from the sort of view that’s typically held by their cognitivist opponents – and yet not a version of

---

of A. J. Ayer, Charles Stevenson, R. M. Hare, Simon Blackburn, and Allan Gibbard all count as part of the ‘noncognitivist tradition’” (Schroeder 2010: 12-13).

5 (Hare 1985/1989: 95); (Hare 1993/1999: 4); (Hare 1997: 47-8); (Hare 1996/1999: 104, 106-8).

6 (Blackburn 1996a). See also (Blackburn 1993a: 54, 185); (Blackburn 1996b: 82-3); (Blackburn 1998: 85).

7 (Gibbard 2003: 183). See also (ibid.: 62-3). s

8 (Stevenson 1962/1963: 71-93). See esp. his characterization on p. 79 of “the so-called noncognitive view,” and the subsequent remark that “[n]o one... continues to hold this view just as it stands.”
non-cognitivism as that view is standardly characterized. And that, too, seems like something that’s worth clearing up.

Here’s the plan for the rest of the chapter. I start with some broadly historical points, focusing on Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare, and making a preliminary case against the standard narrative about the non-cognitivist tradition (Section 2). In Section 3 I do some ground-clearing, focusing on the general idea of a cognitive attitude, and in Section 4 I introduce what I take to be a more helpful distinction between two kinds of cognitivism: theoretical and practical. I then argue that much of the non-cognitivist tradition can be fruitfully understood as working toward a kind of practical cognitivism, and that thinking of the view in this way sheds new light on its proponents’ guiding concerns about normative motivation and normative ontology (Section 5). I conclude with some remarks about quasi-realism and practical content that set the stage for the rest of the dissertation (Section 6).

1.2. Ayer and Stevenson (and a bit of Hare)

Return to the original distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. Cognitivism is the view that normative judgments express cognitive attitudes, i.e., attitudes that have various “cognitivistic” features: they can be true or false, they can constitute knowledge, they can be consistent or inconsistent with one another, they’re subject to the laws of logic, they can figure in genuine disagreements, and so on. And non-cognitivism is the denial of that view.\(^9\)

---

\(^9\) Here and below, when I say ‘they can be true or false’, etc., I mean ‘they’re the sorts of things that are capable of being true or false’, etc. Also, I will slide freely between claims about, e.g., whether normative judgments are truth-apt, and claims about whether the attitudes expressed by those judgments are truth-apt. I take it that these things come as a package deal.
Non-cognitivism so defined is a very strange view. Indeed, it is so strange that it’s hard to imagine anyone seriously believing it. I can see how someone might believe the very different view which says that all normative judgments are false. I find that view implausible, but I can see what might lead someone to hold it. One might have a demanding view about truth, for example, and one might think that normative judgments don’t live up to the standards dictated by that view. But how could someone believe that normative judgments are not even capable of being false, or that they’re not even the sorts of things with which you could disagree? Such a view seems to fly in the face of our most basic understanding of what we’re doing when we engage in normative thought and talk. We would have to be radically mistaken, not in the sense that we all believe a bunch of things that happen to be false (that’s a familiar enough scenario), but in the sense that we don’t even know what we’re doing when we think normative thoughts and make normative claims. And that just seems incredible. No one, I think, could seriously believe this view.

That may seem extreme. Consider the following oft-quoted remarks from Chapter 6 of Ayer’s *Language, Truth, and Logic*:

[S]tatements of value … are simply expressions of emotion which can neither be true nor false. (Ayer 1936: 102-3)

Another man may disagree with me about the wrongness of stealing in the sense that he may not have the same feelings about stealing as I have, and he may quarrel with me on account of my moral sentiments. But he cannot, strictly speaking, contradict me. (Ayer 1936: 107)

These remarks seem like a fairly straightforward endorsement of traditional non-cognitivism. So Ayer at least seems to have believed this view. Maybe so, although we’ll see in a moment that even here things are not entirely straightforward. In any case, I don’t want to speculate too much about what Ayer believed when he wrote that book. He was not primarily concerned with ethics when he wrote it, and while there are glimpses of an interesting view about the nature of ethical
judgment buried in the discussion in Chapter 6, much of what he says there is just a series of hasty and ill-conceived rhetorical remarks, fired off without much thought.\footnote{Indeed, much of what he says there is plainly inconsistent with things that he says elsewhere in the book. For example, his claim that ethical judgments cannot be true or false is inconsistent with the deflationary view of truth that he defends in Chapter 5. (Others have made this point; see (Stoljar 1993) (cf. (Boghossian 1990), (Dreier 2004), (Gibbard 2015).) Similarly (although perhaps less obviously), his claim that ethical judgments have no objective validity is inconsistent with the views about validity and the a priori that he advances in Chapter 4 (see esp. pp. 79-80). More alarming than this, though, are the blatant inconsistencies at a sentence-to-sentence level within Chapter 6 itself. For example, Ayer says, on p. 108 that “in every case in which one would commonly be said to be making an ethical judgment,” the ethical terms are purely expressive of certain feelings. He then says, in the very next sentence, that it is “worth mentioning that ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling” (my emphasis). We cannot take this text seriously as an attempt to present a reasonably coherent view about ethical judgment.} We shouldn’t let these remarks distract us. When Ayer turned his thinking specifically to ethics, he realized that much of what he said in *Language, Truth, and Logic* was hasty and simplistic, and he toned down some of the rhetoric. If we want to understand his view, we’re better off looking to his other works.

I’ll do that shortly, but I first want to note that there’s precedence for the extreme-sounding claim I made a moment ago (the claim that no one could seriously believe traditional non-cognitivism) in C. L. Stevenson, who is generally taken to be one of the founders of the non-cognitivist tradition. After lamenting the fact that his view is often mischaracterized as denying that ethical judgments are truth-apt (Stevenson 1963: 214-220), Stevenson says that the claim that “ethical judgments are neither true nor false” is “so contrary to our linguistic habits that it leaves us perplexed about its meaning” (ibid., 220). He calls this view “absurd,” and he says that when we are clear about what it means we will see that “no one in sanity could take it seriously or even suppose that anyone else ever took it seriously” (ibid.). That ought to put some pressure on the thought that the familiar distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism was good enough, so to speak, before the quasi-realists came along and made things complicated. Stevenson had never heard of quasi-realism when he said these things. Neither had Hare, for that matter, when he said that “moral statements can be true or false,” and that “we can know them to be true or false,”
and that people who classify him as a non-cognitivist “show only that they have not understood the issues” (Hare 1993/1999: 4). They are not trying to pull a fast one on us. They are not trying to perform some “meta-linguistic trickery” that allows them to “embrace common sense in words but reject it in substance” (Huemer 2008: 44). They are rightly trying to distance themselves from a view that is so implausible, and so strange, that (to use Stevenson’s words again) “no one in sanity could take it seriously.”

The only way that I can imagine someone denying that normative judgments are capable of being true or false (or that they’re capable of constituting knowledge, etc.) is if she were using ‘true’ and ‘false’ (or ‘knowledge’, etc.) in some special, quasi-technical sense, and pointing out that normative judgments cannot be true or false in that sense. In which case it would be misleading to characterize her as thinking that normative judgments can’t be true or false. We ought to characterize her instead as thinking that there is some special sense of ‘true’ and ‘false’, and that normative judgments can’t be true or false in that special sense. As Ayer explains in a much-overlooked early paper of his, most of the hasty rhetorical remarks in Chapter 6 of *Language, Truth, and Logic* should be understood along these lines. He writes:

> [T]he view … that what are called ethical statements are not really statements at all, that they are not descriptive of anything, that they cannot be either true or false, is in an obvious sense incorrect. For … it is by no means improper to refer to ethical utterances as statements; when someone characterizes an action by the use of an ethical predicate, it is quite good usage to say that he is thereby describing it; when someone wishes to assent to an ethical verdict, it is perfectly legitimate for him to say that it is true, or that it is a fact, just as, if he wished to dissent from it, it would be perfectly legitimate for him to say that it was false. We should know what he meant and we should not consider that he was using words in an unconventional way. What is unconventional, rather, is the usage of the

---

11 See also (Hare 1997: 47-8): “[N]o relevant dispute is marked out by this question [i.e., the question of whether “moral statements can be true or false”], nor by the question of whether we can know them to be true, nor by the question of whether moral facts or properties exist in the world.”

12 Huemer is talking about quasi-realism in the quoted passage. The passage continues: “No one but Berkeley was fooled when Berkeley claimed to be an anti-skeptic; nor should we be fooled by today’s non-cognitivists.” This makes me wonder whether we’re all wrong about Berkeley as well, but that’s a topic for another day.
philosopher who tells us that ethical statements are not really statements at all but something else … and that they cannot be either true or false. (Ayer 1949: 171-2)

Ayer goes on to say that, despite the fact that ethical judgments\textsuperscript{13} can be true or false in the ordinary sense, nevertheless

when one considers how these ethical statements are actually used, it may be found that they function so very differently from other types of statements that it is advisable to put them into a separate category altogether; either to say that they are not to be counted as statements at all, or, if this proves inconvenient, at least to say that they do not express propositions, and consequently that there are no ethical facts. This does not mean that all ethical statements are held to be false. It is merely a matter of laying down a usage of the words ‘proposition’ and ‘fact’, according to which only propositions express facts and ethical statements fall outside the class of propositions. (Ayer 1949: 172-3)

What Ayer is doing here is not pointing out that ethical judgments can’t be true or false, but – as he puts it – “recommend[ing] a new way of speaking,” such that if we adopted that way of speaking we wouldn’t call such judgments true or false (ibid., 172).

Now I think we can all agree that this is a terrible recommendation. As Stevenson says in the paper cited above, although our ordinary ways of speaking are sometimes “in need of reform, this particular reform shows every sign of being so inconvenient that its advantages (if any) would fail to justify it” (Stevenson 1963: 215-216). It certainly doesn’t recommend itself on considerations of “clarity,” as Ayer suggests (Ayer 1949: 172). Indeed, even suggesting such a proposal was disruptive enough to distract attention from the heart of Ayer’s view, and to generate a healthy dose of suspicion toward the rest of the non-cognitivist tradition ever since. (R. M. Hare, writing in 1952, said that Ayer’s way of presenting his view “raised needless storms of protest” and “stirred up dust which has not yet subsided” (Hare 1952: 9). Hare was right, I think, and the dust has still not subsided.)

\textsuperscript{13} I am here using ‘judgment’ and ‘statement’ interchangeably to make it easier to engage with Ayer’s remarks, which don’t draw a clear distinction between the two. (It will be clear from the passage quoted below that Ayer’s terminology is a mess, and it would take too much space to try to clean it up here.)
The important point here, though, is that it doesn’t matter whether Ayer’s recommendation is a good one, because the recommendation is wholly extraneous to the underlying view about normative judgment that he’s trying to articulate. One can accept the underlying view without accepting the recommendation. As Ayer himself explains:

the purely verbal point [i.e., the point about using the words ‘proposition’, ‘statement’, ‘fact’, etc., in a way that excludes normative judgments] is not of any great importance. If someone still wishes to say that ethical statements are statements of fact, only it is a queer sort of fact, he is welcome to do so. So long as he accepts my grounds for saying that they are not statements of fact, it is simply a question of how widely or loosely we want to use the word ‘fact’. My own view is that it is preferable so to use it as to exclude ethical judgments, but it must not be inferred from this that I am treating them with disrespect. The only relevant consideration is that of clarity. (Ayer 1949: 173)

Part of the reason why Ayer’s recommendation is so bad is that it is nearly impossible to deny that normative judgments can be true or false, or to deny that there are normative facts, while also refraining – as Ayer wants to do – from treating such judgments “with disrespect.” The idea of there being facts of a certain kind is, at least on one way of understanding it, too closely bound up with the idea of the corresponding judgments being such as to get things right, and if you say that there aren’t any normative facts (in this sense of ‘fact’) you are ipso facto saying that normative judgments aren’t capable of getting things right. And to say this is absolutely to treat normative judgments with a kind of disrespect.

This helps to bring out the oddness of Ayer’s proposal. What could be the point in saying that there are no ethical facts, if one means this in a way that has nothing to do with the “respectability” of ethical judgments?14 Ayer later says: “[W]hen I say that moral judgments [are] not statements of fact, and consequently that they cannot be either true or false … I am not saying

---

14 As I explain below, I do think that there was a point to these claims, for Ayer. The point was mainly to dismiss the view that normative judgments are representations of normative facts on a certain way of thinking about facts (one that doesn’t coincide with the ordinary notion of fact, the one that has close conceptual connections to the idea of respectability).
that nothing is good or bad, right or wrong, or that it does not matter what we do” (Ayer 1949: 182). This too seems odd. How could someone insist that moral judgments cannot be true or false, and then go on to point out, in the same breath, that this does not mean that nothing is good or bad, right or wrong, etc.? How could it be that some things are good, and yet the judgment some things are good is neither true nor false? How could someone think that it matters what we do, and yet think there are no true judgments about what matters? Surely, if some things are good, then the judgment some things are good is true. If Ayer’s claim that ethical judgments cannot be true or false is supposed to be understood in a way that has no implications at all for whether things are good or bad, right or wrong, etc., it’s hard to see what interest that claim could possibly have, and what point there could possibly be in making it.

Imagine someone who says that he’s going to use the word ‘true’ to pick out the property that a statement has when it’s provable from certain mathematical axioms, and who then goes on to proclaim that ethical statements are neither true nor false. That claim would clearly not be of any interest to anyone. And it’s looking like the same thing could be said for Ayer’s proclamation – unless he can pull off the miraculous task of showing that we do in fact have reason to care about the applicability in ethics of some notion of truth that has nothing to do with whether things are good or bad, and that has no implications at all for what we ought to do.

Unsurprisingly, I don’t think that Ayer succeeds on that front. Nothing that he goes on to say about normative judgment makes his proposal seem any more plausible.15 But once again, the proposal is not what matters. What matters is the underlying view about normative judgment that

15 What he says is basically just that ethical statements do not describe “the facts of a situation” in the sense in which statements that provide “police-court details” do this, and that the reasons we cite in support of our ethical judgments are not evidence “in the scientific sense” (Ayer 1949: 173-5). These are hardly reasons for refusing to call such judgments ‘true’.
Ayer goes on to articulate. And in order to understand that view, we have to look at what Ayer actually says about normative judgments. We can’t just look at the proposal. And that means that we can’t just look at “non-cognitivism,” either. This is not just because the negative claims that Ayer makes about truths, facts, etc., are not essential to his view. It’s also because when Ayer makes these claims it is not obvious that he is even using ‘true’, ‘fact’, etc., to mean something that we mean when we use these terms. He is using them, as he says, in an “unconventional” way – and one that, as we’ve seen, seems to deprive them of any real interest or significance. And that is almost certainly not how we are using them. After all, we do intend to be talking about something interesting and significant when we discuss (say) whether normative judgments can be true or false.

I will explain the view that I think Ayer meant to be rejecting, as well as the view that he wanted to put in its place, in the next section. But first, I want to generalize the points I have been making here. In my view, the so-called “non-cognitivists” were often led to say things that they shouldn’t have said – either to make bad recommendations like the one that Ayer made, or to say things that suggest a commitment to non-cognitivism as it is usually characterized – because of extraneous theoretical commitments that have nothing essential to do with their underlying views about normative judgment. When we find these philosophers saying things that suggest a denial of some cognitivistic thesis, they are almost always using some crucial terms in a theoretically loaded way, and they are almost never rejecting the things that they can easily seem to be rejecting when their remarks are pulled out of context.

Stevenson, for instance, tends to use the language of ‘rationality’ and ‘justification’ in a way that is far more restrictive than we use it nowadays, and this often leads him to say things about moral judgment and moral reasoning that can be deeply misleading when they are read on
their own, in isolation from the rest of what he says about these things. For example, in his first book, *Ethics and Language*, Stevenson says that there are no rational methods for arriving at ethical judgments, and that there are no reasoned solutions to ethical disputes (Stevenson 1944: 138), but by the end of his discussion it turns out that all he means by this is that the mental processes involved in ethical reasoning have to go beyond the tools of “deductive and inductive logic” (ibid., 173). He allows that there are better and worse methods for arriving at ethical conclusions, and he even allows that we can call the inferences involved in these methods ‘valid’; he simply thinks that the assessment of these inferences is something that calls for evaluative judgment, rather than abstract thinking about logical form (ibid.).

Similarly, Hare frequently suggests that normative language is prescriptive rather than descriptive, and people often take this to mean that normative claims are “disguised commands” that don’t really say anything (Dworkin 2011: 454). But ‘prescriptive’ and ‘descriptive’ were technical terms for Hare, and his way of using them doesn’t exactly coincide with our ordinary, pre-theoretical understanding of these things. To say that a statement is not descriptive, for Hare,

---

16 To be sure, I don’t think the issues here are purely terminological. There is more to Stevenson’s refusal to place ethical judgments in the domain of knowledge, for example, than there is to Ayer’s refusal to call those judgments ‘true’ (though cf. footnote 14 above). Stevenson didn’t want to talk of ethical knowledge because he thought that knowledge was essentially passive in a way that ethical judgments couldn’t be. (See, e.g., (Stevenson 1944: vii), (Stevenson 1963: 8) and elsewhere.)

17 I believe that Stevenson is here hitting upon an important truth. If you give me a purely naturalistic description of what someone did, and I infer that the person acted wrongly, that inference is itself an expression of a normative judgment on my part (roughly, the judgment that acts which have the relevant naturalistic properties are wrong), and as such it is to be assessed primarily on normative grounds (roughly, by asking whether to oppose acts that have those properties).

18 Carnap (1935: 24) actually did say this. But Carnap's view was very different from Hare’s (largely because Carnap, like the early Ayer, was not really thinking about ethics when he said this).

19 Hare is happy to allow, for example, that normative terms pick out properties if “all that is meant by ‘property’ is ‘whatever an adjective stands for’” (Hare 1952: 94). It’s worth noting here that although his writing sometimes suggests otherwise, Hare’s key claim is not that normative language is non-descriptive, but that it has a prescriptive element that cannot be understood solely in terms of a special kind of description (see, e.g., (Hare 1963: 31)). In this
is simply to say something about the rules that govern its use; it doesn’t imply that the statement “doesn’t really say anything.”\(^{20}\) Normative statements do say something, for Hare. They say something about what we ought to do.

One thing that makes these sorts of claims distracting is that, as before, there is a natural way of understanding them on which they would seem to rule out the applicability of a straightforward notion of getting things right in normative matters. There is a perfectly ordinary way of understanding ‘description’, for example, on which to deny that normative judgments are descriptive is just to say that they don’t describe anything, and to say that they don’t describe anything is to say that they don’t make a claim, or that they don’t really say anything; and if you say this you are ipso facto saying that normative judgments are not capable of getting things right. If a judgment doesn’t even say anything, then obviously it cannot succeed or fail to get anything right.\(^{21}\) Similarly, there is a perfectly natural way of understanding ‘rationality’ such that if you say that there are no rational methods in ethics you are thereby denying that ethical judgments are capable of getting things right. If there are no rational methods, then there are no better or worse ways of reasoning about ethical matters, and we might as well make whatever ethical judgments we like; and if we say this we seem to be saying that there’s no such thing as getting it right when it comes to ethics. If we understand them in this way, Stevenson and Hare will seem to be saying things that discredit ethics in an important sense.

\(^{20}\) For Hare’s explanation of what he means by ‘descriptive’ and ‘prescriptive’, see, e.g., (Hare 1963, Ch. 2).

\(^{21}\) It is this line of thought that lies behind claims like this: “We commonly ask ourselves what we should do (or think or feel) in a given situation. For non-cognitivists, there isn’t anything we should do, really” (Shafer-Landau 2003: 27).
Again, though, we should not let these remarks distract us. None of the so-called “non-cognitivists” meant to be discrediting ethics, or saying anything that would threaten to undermine its respectability in this way. And so they shouldn’t have said things that suggest a denial of some cognitivistic thesis, because all of those theses are naturally understood in such a way that denying them amounts to denying that normative judgments can get things right. But no one wants to deny this (or at least this is true for one important sense of ‘getting things right’, which I will explain below). What these philosophers mean to be rejecting is a certain kind of theoretical understanding of normative judgments, and a certain way of thinking about the idea of getting things right that comes along with that way of understanding them. As I will explain in the next section, we can understand pretty much all of what they want to say when they criticize alternative views – and hence much of what they say that has seemed to suggest a commitment to non-cognitivism – and we can accept those criticisms, without having to say anything that would threaten to undermine or discredit ethics in the way that one seems to do when one denies some cognitivistic thesis.

It can be tempting to think that if we approach things in this way the so-called “non-cognivist tradition” will end up losing much of its interest. The reason why Ayer’s view seemed interesting and worth discussing in the first place, you might think, is precisely that it made some radical claim about the non-cognitive status of ethics. But we should resist this temptation. There is much that is of interest in Ayer, and much that is of interest in the rest of the non-cognivist

\[22\] It would take a lot of writing to convince you that this is true of Ayer and Stevenson, but I think that it is. These philosophers were queasy about using the language of correctness because it was too bound up in their thinking with the ideas of accurate representation and scientific belief. But they say lots of things elsewhere that make it clear that they did think that normative judgments were capable of getting things right in the basic sense that I have in mind. See, for instance, the last chapter of (Stevenson 1944), and (Ayer 1984: 34-50). For Ayer’s ambivalence about this, see the discussion at (Ayer 1949: 180-1), at the end of which he concludes that thinking that some moral attitude is correct “is itself taking up a moral standpoint.” As with Stevenson’s remark about ethical inference (see footnote 17 above), I believe that Ayer is here hitting upon an important truth.
tradition, even when we scrap the claims that suggest a commitment to traditional non-cognitivism. To see this, though, we first need to do some ground-clearing. I’ll do that in the next two sections, and then I’ll return to the narrative I’ve been tracing here.

1.3 Ground-clearing: generic or “minimal” cognitivism

Whether Ayer, Stevenson, Hare and others should be construed as “non-cognitivists” depends on how we understand cognitivism. I have been characterizing the latter as the view that normative judgments express cognitive attitudes, i.e., attitudes that have various cognitivistic features: they can be true or false, they can constitute knowledge, they can be consistent or inconsistent with one another, they’re subject to the laws of logic, they can figure in genuine disagreements, and so on. One thing that makes discussion of these issues so difficult, though, is that many philosophers implicitly understand these cognitivistic features in a way that builds in substantive philosophical assumptions that are tendentious in the present context. So I want to begin by focusing our attention on one way of understanding the idea of a cognitive attitude that can helpfully serve as a neutral starting point.

In general, the word ‘cognitive’\(^{23}\) is supposed to indicate something’s place in the realm of thought, and in particular in that domain of thought that has a certain kind of focus and direction – one that enables us to think of the attitudes involved as being directed at a particular issue, or as having some determinate content, toward which the agent can “take a stand.” I find it helpful here

---

\(^{23}\) ‘Cognitive’ is, of course, said in many ways – that’s part of the problem here. In the philosophical context from which our current use of the word derives, it was used more or less interchangeably with ‘scientific’, and it basically meant “meaningful in virtue of its relation to external physical stuff.” This is how Ogden and Richards (1923) understood it, and Ayer and Stevenson both drew their use of the term from them (Stevenson 1937: 18), (Ayer 1984: 28-9); cf. (Stevenson 1938/1963: 43).
to think in terms of an agent’s asking and answering a certain kind of question. We can ask whether it’s raining outside, and we can answer by judging that it is raining outside. Or we can ask which road leads to Larissa, and we can answer by judging that the road on the left is the one that leads to Larissa. When we do this, our thought has a kind of focus and direction that sets it apart from, e.g., vague longings or brute feelings (at least on one way of understanding these things).

One way to get a handle on the idea of a cognitive attitude, then, is to think of it as the sort of mental state that figures in the cognitive activity of asking and answering questions. There is a particular kind of cognitive openness, or cognitive unsettledness, that you have when you are wondering about some question; and this gets closed, or settled, when you form a particular view about the matter in question – for example, when you come to believe that it’s raining outside. Your belief closes off the particular region of cognitive space that was “open” before you formed the belief. You used to be unsure about whether it was raining, but now you have a view on the matter. Someone else might have a different view on the matter; she might think that it’s not raining. Both of these are examples of cognitive attitudes that an agent might have. They are different ways that one might be “cognitively situated,” so to speak, with respect to the question of whether it’s raining outside.

24 The importance of the “question-and-answer” apparatus for understanding reasoning in general is helpfully explored in Pamela Hieronymi’s work (Hieronymi 2006; 2009; 2013). See also Jane Friedman’s work on question-directed attitudes (Friedman 2013).

25 There is a way of thinking about feelings and desires on which they are not “brute sensations,” but rather ways of having one’s mind caught up in a particular kind of practical thought (even if one does not endorse the thoughts that one thereby finds oneself saddled with). I find this view attractive, but I would also want to say that such feelings and desires are cognitive, at least to the extent that they differ from brute sensations and tend toward the “thinking” end of the spectrum. I say a bit more about this when discussing emotions below (in Section 4, and in Chapters 2 and 4).

26 I don’t mean to suggest that cognitive attitudes must always be the product of an explicit attempt to answer a particular question. The claim is just that they’re sorts of attitudes that you could come to be in by answering questions.
To say that some attitude is ‘cognitive’ is also to suggest that it belongs in that realm of thought in which a basic notion of getting things right has application. I say ‘getting things right’ in order to avoid imposing substantive theory on the discussion at the outset, but we could just as well say ‘being correct’ or ‘being true’, so long as we don’t understand these things in substantially “representationalist” terms. That is, we should not assume in advance that correctness, or truth, or “getting things right” must be understood in terms of the mind’s accurately “picturing” or “mirroring” some bit of worldly stuff (more on this in a moment). For now, we should just think of the idea of “getting things right” in terms of a familiar equivalence schema: the judgment that \( p \) gets things right if and only if \( p \). If it’s raining outside and you judge that it’s raining outside, your judgment gets things right. Similarly, if you judge that the road on the left is the one that leads to Larissa and your judgment gets things right, then the road on the left is indeed the one that leads to Larissa.

The applicability of this basic notion of getting things right comes along with the apparatus of asking and answering a question. If you are trying to answer a question, you are engaged in an activity that can be done well or badly, and the result of that activity – the judgment that you make, or the cognitive attitude that you form – is something that can either be correct or incorrect, depending on whether, in making that judgment, you have correctly answered the relevant

---

27 Rorty (1979) offers an extended critique of the kind of representationalist view I am referring to here. While I am sympathetic to Rorty’s criticisms of that view, I do not endorse the relativistic conclusion he draws from them. For a more modest (and in my view more sensible) discussion of what to put in place of representationalism, compare (Price 2011; 2013). My thinking on these issues has been influenced by Price’s discussion.

28 Judgments of taste pose obvious difficulties here (compare (Wright 1992) on judgments about comedy). I think that’s because they occupy an interesting kind of middle ground in our thought. They oscillate between being world-directed (e.g., about the tasty object) and self-directed (e.g., about my subjective response to the tasty object), depending on the circumstances and the cognitive/conversational pressures exerted therein. But the issue requires more space than I can give it here.
question. Cognitive attitudes are thus ones that can succeed or fail to get things right in this basic sense.

I believe that the applicability of this basic notion of getting things right brings with it the applicability of all of the other cognitivistic notions, such as truth, knowledge, consistency, and disagreement – again, as long as these notions are not being inflated with substantive philosophical theory. All of these things come as a package deal. If you think that some judgment gets things right, you’re committed to thinking that the judgment is true, in some perfectly good sense of ‘true’. And if you think that some judgment is true, you’re committed to thinking that someone who made that judgment under the right conditions would count as having knowledge, in some perfectly good sense of ‘knowledge’. And the same goes for all the rest of the cognitivistic features. If you think that some judgment fails to get things right, you’re committed to disagreeing with someone who makes that judgment, in a perfectly good sense of ‘disagree’; and so on.29

We should think of cognitivism, in its most general sense, as the view that normative judgments express attitudes or mental states of the kind I have been describing. They express the sorts of mental states that we typically come to be in when we answer questions. And they have all of the other cognitivistic features that come along with this. Now, normative attitudes do seem to answer genuine questions. They answer questions about what we ought to do. To have a normative attitude is to have a view about what ought to be done. And that does seem like the sort of mental state that could succeed or fail to get things right. After all, there are some things that

---

29 Some qualifications are required here. Perhaps some judgments are capable of getting things right, but we could never be in a position to know whether they’re right (maybe judgments about God are like this). About these I want to say: still, they’re the kind of judgment that would, under the right conditions, count as knowledge (it’s just that we’ll never be “under the right conditions”). They’re not some altogether different kind of mental state. Another complication has to do with judgments that are capable of getting things right but that cannot be disagreed with, because there is no contradictory judgment that anyone could coherently make (judgments about very basic conceptual truths might be like this, as well as judgments like “I’m here now”). I am not sure what to say about these cases, except that it seems possible to at least agree with such judgments, and that seems good enough.
ought to be done – promises ought to be kept, honesty and good-will ought to be encouraged, deceit and exploitation ought to be condemned. If you think that we ought to do these things, you’re correct – your judgment (or your attitude) gets things right. Even Ayer would accept this, since he thinks that some things are good and bad, and that it matters what we do. All sides can agree, then, that normative attitudes are cognitive in this “minimal” or generic sense.\(^{30}\)

This makes cognitivism somewhat trivial.\(^{31}\) I think that is as it should be. The view itself is not what’s interesting. What’s interesting is why the view is true.\(^{32}\) What is it about normative judgments that makes them cognitive? How should we understand the kind of cognitive activity we’re engaged in when we ask and answer normative questions? What are we doing when we make a normative judgment, and in what sense can that sort of judgment be correct or incorrect? These are the interesting questions, and they’re the ones that the philosophers in the non-cognitivist tradition have something interesting to say about. We should stop framing the debate between these philosophers and their more traditional “cognitivist” opponents in terms of whether normative judgments are cognitive or non-cognitive, and start framing it instead in terms of opposing answers that theorists might give to these deeper questions about the nature of normative judgment.

---

\(^{30}\) The view that I am here calling ‘minimalist cognitivism’ is similar in some respects to what Parfit (2017) calls ‘Non-Realist Cognitivism’, though he doesn’t characterize it in quite the same way. For what it’s worth, I think the term ‘minimalism’ is about as misleading as ‘non-cognitivism’ and ‘quasi-realism’ here (compare (Scanlon 2014: 28)), but I have to pick my battles.

\(^{31}\) It is not entirely trivial, though. It doesn’t follow simply from fact that normative language has declarative syntax, as Jamie Dreier’s ‘hiyo’ example shows (Dreier 1996). (‘Hiyo’ is a made-up predicate that Dreier introduces by saying that ‘X is hiyo’ is used to accost X.) I think the lesson to be drawn from Dreier’s example is that the mere fact that we can define usage rules for a predicate that figures in declarative sentences is not enough for the mental states expressed by those sentences to be cognitive attitudes. The mental states must have the kind of cognitive structure elucidated above, and there are interesting questions about what kinds of mental states meet that requirement.

1.4 Moving forward: theoretical vs. practical cognitivism

Here is a more useful distinction for thinking about these questions:

*Theoretical cognitivism:* Normative judgments express cognitive attitudes that are fundamentally a kind of representational state.

*Practical cognitivism:* Normative judgments express cognitive attitudes that are fundamentally a kind of practical state.\(^{33}\)

I believe that the philosophers in the non-cognitivist tradition are best understood as rejecting, not cognitivism, but what I am calling *theoretical cognitivism*. And I believe that they are best understood as working toward a version of what I’m calling *practical cognitivism*. Before I get to those claims, though, let me first say a bit about how I’m understanding these two views.

First, by ‘fundamentally’, I don’t mean ‘at the most fundamental level of description’, which may (for all I know) be given in purely physical terms. I mean, instead, to be indicating a certain level of explanation: the one at which we are operating when we try to say, for example, what certain kinds of mental states or events (e.g., beliefs or assertions) “really are.” Consider: some philosophers think that beliefs are best understood as dispositions to behave in certain ways;

\(^{33}\) I believe that the view I’m calling ‘practical cognitivism’ has historical precedents in Aristotle and Kant, who thought of ethics as an essentially practical subject, but I won’t engage that historical issue here. Some philosophers have recently begun to use the term ‘practical cognitivism’ to denote a view that harkens back to that tradition (Bagnoli 2012, 2013); (Engstrom 2009, 2013), although the view they discuss is different in several important respects from the one I have in mind here. One crucial difference is that the view I’m interested in does not build in Kantian assumptions about the objects of normative judgment being somehow “created by” or “coming from” cognition itself. On the view I prefer, the objects of normative judgment are just normative propositions, and this gets explained in a way that makes questions about “where they come from” or “how we could be in touch with them” seem inappropriate. I say more about this below (Section 6), and in Chapter 6.
others think that they are best understood as internal representational states, perhaps states of the brain. These philosophers disagree about what sorts of things beliefs are, fundamentally speaking; they both agree that my mental affirmation of a certain content is a belief, but they disagree about what that belief fundamentally is. Similarly, theoretical cognitivists and practical cognitivists disagree about what sorts of things normative attitudes are, fundamentally speaking. They provide different answers to a question about the ultimate nature of normative attitudes.

My use of the word ‘fundamentally’ here is also meant to indicate that the relevant account of normative attitudes – whether as representational states or as practical states of a certain kind – is meant to do a certain kind of explanatory work. In particular, the fact that normative attitudes are (say) representational states is supposed to explain why they qualify as cognitive attitudes. For the theoretical cognitivist, the fact that normative attitudes purport to represent what the world is like is supposed to explain their being truth-apt, knowledge-apt, and so on. For the practical cognitivist, by contrast, these features get explained by appealing to the practical nature of normative attitudes. I will say more about this as we proceed, but for now the point is just that ‘fundamentally’ here does not mean ‘at the most fundamental level at which reality may be described’, but rather ‘at the deeper level of description at which we try to say what kind of mental state normative attitudes are, and to explain various of their features by characterizing their underlying nature’.

The next thing to note is that the idea of a representational state here must be understood in a particular way. Talk of representation often goes hand-in-hand with talk of truths, facts, properties, states of affairs, and “the world,” and all of these things can be understood in a purely “deflationary” way – one that comes along for free with the applicability of the other cognitivistic notions. It is trivially true that all cognitive attitudes are representational states in a deflationary
sense, where ‘represents’ just means ‘thinks’ or ‘believes’. Whenever we have a determinate question and an agent who answers that question, we can say that the agent “represents the world” in a certain way. If you think that telling the truth is good, then we can say that you represent telling the truth as being good. Or, as we might also put it, you represent telling the truth as having the property of being good. Or, you represent the state of affairs of truth-telling’s being good. And so on. We can talk this way whenever the apparatus of asking and answering a question is in place – whenever we are dealing with a form of mental activity that has that kind of structure and discipline, so that we can separate the thinking from the what is thought. But the key point here is that, on this purely deflationary way of understanding these claims about representation, properties, states of affairs, etc., they do not add anything to what we could put more simply by just saying that the agent thinks that telling the truth is good. In particular, they do not signal the existence of some substantial, theoretically interesting relation – the representation relation, as we might call it – that is supposed to hold between the agent’s mind and some bit of worldly “stuff.”

When philosophers talk about representation, they often have in mind something more substantial than the deflationary notion I have just described. They are often understanding such talk – sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly – in a way that is supposed to do substantial theoretical work.34 This can be seen in the way that these philosophers conceive of certain foundational issues in moral philosophy, in the metaphors they use to articulate and defend their

---

34 See (Wright 1992, esp. Chs. 4-5) for an explicit attempt to develop the substantial notion of representation described below into an explanation of what makes an attitude cognitive. I believe that many self-styled “robust realists,” as well as many who see themselves as normative skeptics, have in mind something like the conception of cognitive attitudes Wright articulates in that work. It’s worth noting here that not all philosophers who think of themselves as opposed to “non-cognitivism” understand normative beliefs in terms of a substantial notion of representation. In particular, so-called “quietist” realists would reject this understanding (Dworkin 1996, 2011); (Scanlon 2003, 2014); (Parfit 2011, 2017); and possibly (Nagel 1986, 1997). I say more about this view in Chapter 6.
views, and in the reasons they give for opposing what they see as overly deflationary alternatives.\textsuperscript{35}

Consider, for example, the following remarks from Russ Shafer-Landau’s book, \textit{Moral Realism}:\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{quote}
[A] view is cognitivist if it allows for a central class of judgments within a domain to count as beliefs, capable of being true or false \textit{in virtue of their more or less accurate representation} of the facts within the domain. (Shafer-Landau 2003: 17; emphasis added)
\end{quote}

For Timmons and Blackburn, as for all other non-cognitivists, there is nothing that can \textit{make} moral judgments true—no moral facts or moral reality that they could possibly \textit{correctly represent}, nothing they are true \textit{of}. (Shafer-Landau 2003: 20n.8; first two emphases added)

If we are understanding ‘representation’ in the purely deflationary sense, it would be odd to say, as Shafer-Landau does, that some judgment is capable of being true or false in virtue of its more or less accurate representation of the facts.\textsuperscript{37} His use of ‘in virtue of’ here indicates that he has in mind an explanatory role for such talk. The claim that some judgment accurately represents the facts is supposed to explain the fact that the judgment is true, and it can’t do this if ‘accurately represents the facts’ is just a fancy way of saying ‘is true’. Shafer-Landau is employing a more robust notion of representation here, and that helps to shape much of what he does in the book.

To give just one example that will be important in what follows: it is because Shafer-Landau is thinking of normative judgments as robust representations of the world that he thinks we need to be able to show that values could “plausibly count as occupants of our world” if ethics

\textsuperscript{35} As an example of this last, we might consider the fact that theoretical cognitivists typically oppose views like quasi-realism (which allow for ethical beliefs and ethical truth in a minimal sense) for being overly deflationary. For a few prominent examples, see (Shafer-Landau 2003, Ch. 1), (Cuneo 2007, Ch. 6), and (Enoch 2011, Ch. 2).

\textsuperscript{36} Compare (Enoch 2011: 1, 49, 236, 250).

\textsuperscript{37} There is a scope ambiguity here. Shafer-Landau might be saying that beliefs are [capable of being true or false] in virtue of [more or less accurately representing the facts]. Or he might be saying that beliefs are capable of being [true or false] in virtue of [more or less accurately representing the facts]. On the first reading, representational purport explains truth-aptness in general. On the second reading, accurate representation explains truth and inaccurate representation explains falsity in particular cases. The notion of representation is clearly meant to be doing some explanatory work on either reading, so my point holds either way. Thanks to Selim Berker for helping me to see this ambiguity.
is not “to go the way of leprechauns and centaurs” (ibid., 3). The background picture that underlies this thought is one on which normative judgments are seen as attempts to “track” some bits of worldly stuff, so that concerns about the legitimacy of ethics take the shape of concerns about whether a certain type of entity “really exists.” I will say more about this ontological approach to vindicating ethics, and why I think it is misguided, in Chapter 6. For now, the important point is just that the concerns that animate this approach only arise if we are thinking of normative judgments in a certain way: as the sorts of things that are correct (when they are) in something like the way that maps or portraits are “correct,” so that we can ground or undermine the legitimacy of normative practice as a whole by checking, as it were, whether our normative judgments represent things that are really out there. To say that some agent’s belief is true because it accurately represents the facts, on this approach, comes to mean something like this: there is some existing state of the agent, and it stands in a certain relation to some existing bit of reality, and it is in virtue of this that the agent’s belief counts as being true.

And it is just this sort of picture that underlies the objection to non-cognitivism in Shafer-Landau’s second remark. The objection is that Blackburn and other non-cognitivists cannot account for moral truth, because on their view there are no moral facts, or no moral reality, that moral judgments could correctly represent. If the notion of representation at work in that objection were just the deflationary one, Shafer-Landau’s charge would have no force, since Blackburn clearly does think that some moral judgments are true, and hence that they “accurately represent

---

38 Compare David Enoch’s suggestion that if we want to take ethics seriously we need to understand ethical attitudes as “fully representational” beliefs that are “about things that are out there in Plato’s heaven” (Enoch 2011: 236).

39 Needless to say, Shafer-Landau is not alone in thinking that ethics needs this kind of ontological vindication. The vast majority of philosophers working in metaethics share this approach (this includes even those who think that ethics is illegitimate because the world doesn’t contain normative “stuff”). Quietists and constructivists are, I think, the main exceptions.
the facts” in that sense.\textsuperscript{40} What Shafer-Landau is saying is that there is some other, more robust sense of “accurate representation,” and that the non-cognitivist can’t account for accurate representation in that sense. It is this more robust notion of representation that is central to the view I’m calling ‘theoretical cognitivism’.

Let me make two further remarks about this supposedly more robust notion of representation before I move on. First, I have to confess that I myself don’t know quite what to make of it. There are various uncashed metaphors that philosophers typically deploy in this context – they talk about representations that “put us in touch with facts that are out there in the world,” or representations that “latch onto genuine features of reality,” etc. – but none of this seems to make much sense outside of the narrow context in which we are literally tracking physical objects in our surrounding environment. Suppose we ask: What does ‘the world’ mean, in a claim like “normative judgments represent facts that are out there in the world?” Presumably it doesn’t mean “the planet Earth.” But what does it mean, then? The collection of all that is the case? Then it is trivially true that normative judgments represent facts that are “out there in the world.” It is the case that kindness is good, after all, and so the judgment that kindness is good represents something that’s “out there in the world” – or at least that’s so if ‘the world’ just means “the collection of all that is the case.”\textsuperscript{41} If it means something else, it is on those theorists who want to go beyond the deflationary conception of representation to explain this.

\textsuperscript{40} Blackburn makes this point throughout his writings, but see esp. (Blackburn 1998, Ch. 9).

\textsuperscript{41} I am here echoing a common refrain of the “quietist” philosophers cited above (n.34). The point has also been emphasized throughout the non-cognitivist tradition. See for example the replies to Mackie in (Ayer 1984), (Hare 1985), and (Blackburn 1993a); cf. (Gibbard 2003: 182). I should note that it’s not \textit{entirely} trivial that normative judgments represent facts that are out there in the world in the sense of “all that is the case.” In the reasoning above, this follows from the substantive normative claim that kindness is good. But as long as anything is good or bad, and as long as this is not due to how we happen to feel or think about things (except in the obvious sense in which it is bad to do something that makes someone feel bad, for example), it will be true in this trivial sense that some normative judgments represent facts that are “out there in the world.”
The second thing that I want to say here – and this is my reason for belaboring the distinction between deflationary and supposedly more “robust” notions of representation – is that discussions in contemporary metaethics tend to run together talk of representation in the “robust” sense with talk of cognition in the minimal sense I described at the beginning of this section. And so they tend to assume that ‘cognitivism’ just means ‘theoretical cognitivism’, and that there simply couldn’t be any other kind of cognitivist view. They assume that we are only in the domain of correctness-aptness, knowledge-aptness, disagreement-aptness, and so on when we are in the domain of representation, where ‘representation’ is again supposed to mean something more than what the non-cognitivists are able to give us.

I believe that there is a general view about the nature of the mind, and about the nature of cognition in particular, that underlies these assumptions – one that is frequently brought to bear on metaethical discussions but rarely made explicit. In a word, the view is one on which cognitive activity in general is conceived as, essentially, a kind of representational activity. On this way of thinking about cognition, the cognitivistic notions described above – correctness-aptness, for example – are understood in terms of accurate representation of the world. An attitude is true or correct, on this view, just in case it accurately represents the world – where this somehow goes beyond saying “the attitude is a belief that \( p \) and \( p \),” and has to do instead with some substantial “tracking” or “mirroring” or “latching onto” relation that obtains between some bit of the agent’s mind and some bit of worldly “stuff” that exists outside of her mind. Representational purport, on this view, is what sets cognitive attitudes apart from non-cognitive ones. It is what puts an attitude in the domain of truth, correctness, disagreement, knowledge, and so on.

When you apply this general view of cognitive attitudes to the particular case of normative attitudes, you get the view that I am calling theoretical cognitivism: normative judgments are
fundamentally a kind of representational state, and they are capable of being true, constituting knowledge, etc., because they purport to represent the world in a substantial sense, and because representation in that sense is something that can be done accurately or inaccurately. If a normative judgment accurately represents the normative part of the world, then it is true; if it does so in the right way (is formed under the right conditions), then it constitutes knowledge; and so on.

What the non-cognitivists saw quite clearly was that this cannot be the right way to think about normative judgment. And as we’ll see in the next section, the concerns they had about this view are not the ones that are usually attributed to them. Their guiding concern was not primarily to “cut down on ontological costs,” but rather to understand normative judgments in a way that makes sense of how they could do one of their primary jobs, which is to settle where an agent stands on a practical question. As Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare all realized (and as I will explain in more detail in the next section), it is wholly irrelevant, in trying to address this concern, whether or not we are willing to “inflate our ontology” and understand normative judgments as expressing beliefs about (or representations of) the inflated part of the ontology. The real problem is not that it is “too costly” to think of normative beliefs as representations of an inflated ontology, but that the underlying conception of belief that makes it seem like a good idea to “inflate” one’s ontology in the first place is wholly out of place in the normative domain. The representationalist conception of belief that underlies this move is not rich enough to furnish an understanding of normative judgment; even if we could make sense of the relevant representation relation in a non-deflationary way, making a normative judgment would have to involve more than trying to get one’s mind to stand in that kind of relation to some existing bit of worldly stuff. That is one of the guiding insights of the non-cognitivist tradition.
It is also the starting point of the view that I am calling ‘practical cognitivism’. At the heart of that view is the idea that normative judgments have their home in a kind of thinking that is importantly different from the kind that we’re engaged in when we are trying to “track” bits of worldly stuff in our surrounding environment. They have their home in a kind of thinking that is *irreducibly practical* – the kind that we engage in when we are reasoning our way to and through decisions, actions, intentions, and plans. Normative judgments are answers to questions that we face when we are engaged in this kind of thinking – questions about “what to do, what to admire, whom to badger, when to repent, and so on” (Blackburn 1998: 51) – and these are not reducible to ontological questions about the existence or instantiation of special kinds of properties.\(^{42}\) We answer these questions by taking up a kind of active stance, or by adopting a certain kind of practical orientation toward the world, and doing this is itself a kind of cognitive activity, a kind of thinking. Our normative judgments express the practical states that we come to be in when we engage in this kind of cognitive activity. They are not fundamentally attempts to accurately represent some existing state of the world in the sense described above, but they are nevertheless *cognitive* in the generic sense of purporting to answer questions and being capable of getting things right.\(^{43}\)

---

42 As I have been saying, this does not mean that there are no such things as normative properties, or that nothing is really good or bad, or whatever. It just means that talk of properties here has to be understood in the first instance in terms of what it allows us to *do*, which is (roughly) to engage in abstract reasoning and discussion about practical matters.

43 I have purposely avoided characterizing the distinction between representational states and practical states here in terms of different “directions of fit,” for a few reasons. First, phrases like “mind-to-world” import the same difficulties that are involved in phrases like “represents the world” (compare (Scanlon 2014: 66)). Second, “world-to-mind” talk suggests that practical states are *correct* when they succeed in being “satisfied,” in the sense of bringing about what they aim to bring about. I want to resist building that into the very idea of a practical state. And third, the kind of vocabulary that typically goes along with the “mind-to-world” direction of fit – e.g., being responsive to evidence, being answerable to the facts, etc., – are all things that I think belong to practical states, once we properly understand talk of ‘evidence’, ‘answerability’, ‘facts’, and so on. As before, all of these things come as a package deal once we have a thought with content that can be correct or incorrect. See (Frost 2014) for a compelling case against direction-of-fit theory in general.
I will have more to say about the idea of a practical state, and about the kind of thinking that issues in such states, in subsequent chapters, where the aim will be to develop and defend a particular version of practical cognitivism. But I have already said enough to put some initial constraints in place, and to make some preliminary remarks about the kinds of things that count as practical states in the relevant sense. At the very least, a practical state must have the kind of structure and discipline that allows it to figure in the cognitive activity of asking and answering questions. And it must have the cognitivistic features that come along with this (it must be the sort of thing that could be true or correct, the sort of thing that could constitute knowledge under the right conditions, and so on). That much is necessary for the view to count as a form of cognitivism.

I believe that this rules out thinking of practical states as “mere feelings” or “mere emotions” – but the word ‘mere’ is important here. It is meant to indicate a certain way of thinking about feelings and emotions, according to which they are states in the face of which the agent is wholly passive, or states that do not constitute anything like a point of view through which the agent apprehends the world. Perhaps no feelings or emotions are completely like this. Still, it is helpful for getting a handle on the idea of a practical state to think in terms of a spectrum that has this kind of “passive” state at one end, and that has more “active” states that express something about what the agent thinks, or about how she views the world, at the other end. I believe that states like choices or resolutions are the clearest example of the latter sort of state. Examples of the former sort of state are hard to come by, but we can bring the relevant contrast in view by considering two different ways in which one might experience an emotion such as anger.

Sometimes being angry involves having your mind caught up in a certain kind of practical thinking. In cases like this, when you are fully “in the grip” of anger, your mind is oriented toward the person who offended you, say, in such a way that you see him as to be denounced, or something
like this. To that extent, being angry – or at least being in the grip of anger – may count as a kind of practical state in the sense I have in mind. It will do so if being angry – or, again, being in the grip of anger – is a matter of having your mental life suitably focused and directed in such a way that we can appropriately characterize you as thinking that the person who offended you is to be denounced (or whatever). In such cases, to be angry at someone who offended you will involve being in a state that counts as answering the question of whether (say) that person is to be denounced.\textsuperscript{44}

On the other hand, you can also become aware of your anger and experience it from a more detached point of view. When you do this, your anger no longer grips you in the same way, and you may cease to see the person who offended you as \textit{to be denounced} (or whatever), even as you continue to experience some of the other central features of anger, e.g., bodily constriction, mental agitation, shakiness or “hotness,” and so on. It seems to me that in this sort of case you still count as being angry, in a sense, even though you are not in the grip of anger – even though you cease to see the world through the lens of your anger, as we might say. (Sometimes you can be aware of anger cooling and subsiding, after all, and that wouldn’t be possible if your anger simply evaporated, or turned into something else, as soon as you ceased to be in its grip.) It is this sense of “being angry” that I have in mind as lying at the passive end of the spectrum. Of course, things are messy here, and we are usually somewhere in between. But to the extent that some feeling or

\textsuperscript{44} This is not to say that being angry, on such a view, would have to involve an explicit exercise of raising the relevant question and giving a positive verdict in one’s self-conscious thought. Compare: a certain extreme kind of paranoia may be such that, if you are subject to it, you thereby count a having settled the question of whether people are out to get you. This is not to say that an agent who undergoes extreme paranoia must have explicitly deliberated about whether people are out to get her and answered in the affirmative. It is just to characterize a feature of the cognitive economy of an agent who exhibits such paranoia; such an agent is cognitively situated in a particular way with respect to the question of whether people are out to get her. So too, perhaps, an agent who feels a certain kind of anger may be cognitively situated in a particular way with respect to the question of whether (say) a certain person is to be denounced.
emotion tends toward this end of the spectrum, it is not an example of a practical state in the sense I have in mind. Having a feeling or emotion in this sense is not a way of having your mental life suitably focused and directed in such a way that we can appropriately characterize you as thinking that someone is (say) to be denounced.

The practical cognitivist thinks that we can best understand normative practice by explaining normative judgments as expressions of a kind of practical state. Making a normative judgment, in the fullest and most proper sense, is making a certain kind of move in the practical activity of figuring out what to do, and this is a genuine kind of cognitive activity in which we can succeed or fail to get things right. This sort of view raises a number of important questions, the most obvious of which, perhaps, is how a practical state could be the sort of thing that’s capable of getting things right, or of being correct. I take up that question in later chapters, but the basic idea is that (i) from the point of view of someone who’s engaged in practical thinking, we have no choice but to regard some practical states as correct or incorrect, and (ii) there is no relevant sense in which we could be mistaken about this. Practical states can be correct or incorrect, then, but this is something that we can only appreciate and assess “from the inside,” as beings who can and must engage in practical thinking about what to do.

As I say, that is a story that will emerge in later chapters. My aim here, though, is just to get the basic idea behind practical cognitivism on the table, and to suggest that we can get a much better understanding of what the philosophers in the non-cognitivist tradition have been up to if we think of them as working toward a version of practical cognitivism in the sense I’ve been describing. As I will argue in the next section, much of the work in that tradition can be fruitfully understood as an attempt to carve out space for a notion of ethical thinking as something that’s
intimately connected to the enterprise we’re engaged in as active beings who make up their minds about what to do.

It might seem strange to suggest that philosophers like Ayer and Stevenson (and indeed everyone else in the non-cognitivist tradition) have really been cognitivists all along. And I do think that it would be something of an exaggeration to say this. What I actually think is that the view I’m calling ‘practical cognitivism’ comes in and out of focus in the work of these philosophers, and that they are usually at their best when they have it clearly in view. As I’ll explain below, I think there are interesting reasons why the view comes in and out of focus for them, and I think that reflecting on this can help to orient our thinking in a way that brings their central concerns and their guiding insights more clearly into view. And that’s what really interests me in the end.

1.5 Rethinking “non-cognitivism”

Ayer famously said, in *Language, Truth, and Logic*, that the use of ethical language simply indicates that the speaker’s remarks are “attended by certain feelings,” and that moral judgments themselves are “pure expressions of feeling” (Ayer 1936: 107). And Stevenson similarly suggested, in “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,” that moral language can be understood in terms of its emotive meaning, which he characterized as “the immediate aura of feeling which hovers about a word” (Stevenson 1937/1963: 21). This is nothing like the view that I am calling ‘practical cognitivism’. Simply having certain feelings “hovering around” in your mind when you say something is not the sort of mental going-on that could constitute a kind of cognitive activity.
There is no question that such an “aura of feelings” could be said to answer, and no sense in which those feelings could be said to get anything right.\textsuperscript{45}

But we should not place too much emphasis on these remarks. This early emphasis on “mere feelings” was incidental to the philosophical concerns that were motivating these philosophers; it arose in part from the fact that they didn’t have a positive view of human agency, which was their real concern. What happened was this: both Ayer and Stevenson appreciated early on that moral judgments had a special tie to deliberation and action, and that because of this they had to be importantly different from the states of mind that were generally taken, at that time, to be the paradigm case of belief (basically, empirical judgments). What they failed to fully appreciate – though it does occasionally come into view, and more so later on – was that there is a perspective from which deliberation and action cannot be understood solely in terms of the causal workings of various emotions and desires: namely, the perspective of the agent herself, as she’s engaged in deliberation and action.\textsuperscript{46} Since this is precisely the perspective from which the special tie between moral judgment and action comes into view, there was bound to be difficulty here. Ayer and Stevenson could maintain their emphasis on “passive feelings” only as long as they were able to maintain a certain theoretical distance from their subject matter. When they thought of moral language and the agents who use that language from afar, as it were, they were able to theorize in terms of “emotions and feelings” causally interacting with “strict beliefs” in order to produce various kinds of behavior, and from that point of view it seemed natural to characterize moral

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{45} Again, setting aside those cases where emotions and feelings tend more toward the “active” or “agent-involving” end of the spectrum. But those cases are surely not ones where we simply have an “aura of feelings” hovering about in our minds as we say something. They are cases where the mind is practically oriented in a sustained and focused way.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{46} I don’t mean to suggest that deliberation is extra-causal, here. The point is just that, even if deliberation can be appropriately viewed “from the outside” as a certain kind of causal process, the agent herself cannot understand her own deliberations, when she is deliberating, as a series of causal happenings that are wholly outside of her control.
\end{flushright}
judgments as being essentially caught up in the “emotion” side of those causal interactions. But the resulting picture can only remain credible if ‘emotion’ is used with a capaciousness and elasticity that is highly unnatural; and this is indeed how Ayer and Stevenson used the term in their early writings. “Emotion” was a kind of grab-bag category for pretty much any element in our psyche that was not an empirical belief.  

In the first paper that he wrote specifically about ethics, Ayer downplays the role of “passive feelings” in moral practice and emphasizes the role of more active, practical states. He writes:

[I]n saying that [someone] acted wrongly, I express a resolution not to imitate them…To say, as I once did, that these moral judgements are merely expressive of certain feelings, feelings of approval or disapproval, is an over-simplification. (Ayer 1949: 176; emphasis added)  

A similar shift can be found in Stevenson. In his second book, Facts and Values, Stevenson says that

if ethics is to be “practical” philosophy and not a mockery of what is practical, it must be prepared to look beyond the peculiarly moral attitudes and consider all those other attitudes by which a man’s conduct may be directed. (Stevenson 1950/1963: 60; emphasis added)

And it is clear from the surrounding discussion that Stevenson means to be talking about something active when he speaks of “attitudes” that “direct” our conduct. He is talking primarily about what he calls ‘ethical decisions’, and he says that these consist in “the resolution of conflict” among an

---

47 For Ayer, this was due, I think, to his initial thought that “describing the different feelings that the different ethical terms are used to express … is a task for the psychologist” (Ayer 1936: 112). He later backed off from this idea, acknowledging that it put “fetters upon moral philosophy” which “impoverished the subject to an unreasonable extent” (Ayer 1984: 17). Ayer did say, in LTL, that “ethical terms do not serve only to express feeling,” and he points out that they “are calculated also to arouse feeling, and so to stimulate action” (op. cit.: 105). The “and so” bit encapsulates the whole of the problem that I am here trying to draw out.

48 See also (Ayer 1947/2008: 202): “[S]ince we are constantly faced with the practical necessity of action, it is natural … to act in accordance with certain principles, and the choice of principles implies a positive set of values” (emphasis added).
agent's competing attitudes and preferences (ibid., 60). The “cognitive elements” involved in ethical thinking, he says, “spring from a conflict in attitudes,” and “the ethical problem lies in resolving the conflict” (ibid., 58). When someone makes an ethical decision, he is “making his attitudes … speak with one voice” (ibid., 56). Stevenson cannot here be thinking of the mental states involved in ethical thinking as passive feelings or attitudes. Those are precisely the things that are in conflict, and that have to be made to “speak with one voice.” And passive feelings, in any case, cannot resolve anything; it is agents, and the active states that express their agency, that do that.

Stevenson says something very much like this in his first book when he is attempting to characterize the difference between ethical thinking and (what he called) ‘cognitive’ thinking. He says:

To say that a decision is “nothing but” a manifestation of one’s preferences is to speak with little discernment. It is certainly not a matter of becoming introspectively aware of one’s present attitudes—for when a decision is required these attitudes have no definite direction. Rather, it is a matter of systematizing one’s actual and latent attitudes in a way that gives them definite direction. … [Someone] who resolves a conflict … is mentally going through the processes which a psychologist studies; he is using beliefs … to resolve his conflict, not developing other beliefs about how this happens. … A man faced with a moral decision must do more than cognize; he must put his beliefs to work in reorienting his emotional life. (Stevenson 1944: 132-5; emphasis in the original)

It is clear from the context of these remarks that the distinction Stevenson is here invoking – the distinction between passively becoming aware of one’s “attitudes or preferences,” and actively doing something to or with those attitudes – is precisely the distinction he intends to capture when he distinguishes between the “cognitive” and the “non-cognitive” or “emotive” aspects of our

---

49 See also (Stevenson 1944: 130): “When does a person feel the need of making up his mind about what is right or wrong? Not, certainly, when his attitudes speak with one voice, urging him in a definite direction. His mind is then already made up … Rather, the need of a personal ethical decision arises [when his] attitudes do not speak with one voice, but urge him both this way and that, with the net result leaving him in a painful and inactive state of irresolution.”
psyche. Calling something ‘emotive’ was, for Stevenson, a way of indicating its role in this active process of “reorienting one’s emotional life.”

He did not always maintain a clear perspectival distinction between deliberation and causation – between taking up for oneself the question of what to do, and being caused to do something as it were independently of the making up of one’s own mind – but he does seem to have had the former often in mind. And that seems far and away the more plausible view to hold here. If we are going to think of ethical judgments as expressing a kind of practical state, we cannot think of them as expressing just any kind of “feeling” or “preference” that the agent may have. We have to think of them as expressing states that have, so to speak, “more of the agent” in them – states that have a special place in the activity of orienting and directing one’s practical and emotional life. Stevenson was well aware of this, and hence it does not seem alien to his thinking to bring him under the heading of practical cognitivism. He was, in my view, a kind of proto-practical cognitivist.

As I said above, the need to emphasize more active states of mind tends to come into view more clearly when these writers focus on the perspective of an agent who has to answer ethical questions for herself. And it is from this perspective that we can best appreciate their criticisms of

---

50 See also his explanation of the distinction (which he admits is somewhat artificial) between “beliefs” and “attitudes” at (Stevenson 1944: 7-8), at the end of which he concludes that “for practical purposes” we can and must recognize these as two “distinguishable factors” in human action.

51 See for example his explication of the sense in which ethical language influences people at (Stevenson 1944: 92-3): “‘Is X good?’ is a remark that prompts an ethical judgment from the hearer, and can readily be taken to mean, ‘Do you approve of X, and shall I? ’ The phrase, ‘Shall I?’ is a request for influence, and can be roughly compared to a request to be commanded, as in the context, ‘Shall I take the left turn, or the right?’” (second emphasis mine). Bear in mind that Stevenson is offering what he acknowledges to be an overly simplistic analysis here; the key point is just that answering the question of whether something is good is akin to answering a deliberative question, which is something like accepting a command.

52 See (Urmson 1968) for a helpful discussion about the lack of clarity surrounding the notion of an “attitude” in early emotivism. R. M. Hare’s son, John Hare, says that Stevenson eventually came to see Hare’s prescriptivism – which I think of as a paradigm case of practical cognitivism – to be a better statement of his original thought (J. Hare 2007: 211n38).
theoretical cognitivism, as well as their motivations for holding their own views. These philosophers are often understood as being motivated by empiricist concerns about “inflating” our ontology, on the one hand, and Humean concerns about “motivation,” on the other. The idea is that they don’t want to countenance the existence of “queer entities,” and they don’t want to allow that there could be such things as “motivating beliefs”; and so they try to interpret normative practice in a way that avoids commitment to normative properties, and that construes normative judgments as expressions of something other than belief.

I don’t think that’s right. It misconstrues the concerns that are motivating these philosophers, and it makes the issues about ontology and “motivating beliefs” seem separate when they are in fact deeply connected – as I’ll now try to explain.

Start with the ontological point. The usual thought here is that the non-cognitivists are deeply opposed to “augment[ing] the scientific world view with an additional layer of moral properties,” because they want their “ontology [to be] compatible with that proposed by the most advanced science of the day” (Shafer-Landau 2003: 21). Now, there is indeed a strong empiricist strain running throughout much of the non-cognitivist tradition, and that makes it natural to characterize their concerns about normative ontology in this way. But I think the characterization is misleading, and that it obscures the heart of their worry here. The primary worry is not that we can get a simpler, more scientific worldview by refusing to “augment” the world with additional kinds of properties. The worry is that talk of “augmenting the world” is wholly out of place here. It makes no sense, and even if it did make sense it would not be able to do the work that philosophers want it to do – for example, underwriting the truth of our moral judgments, or securing a kind of objectivity in the moral domain. The problem is not about the “high costs” of
“augmenting reality” with additional layers of moral properties. It is about the irrelevance of such an “augmented reality” for the purposes of engaging in moral practice.

This is why Ayer says, not that he is opposed to objectivism about values, but that “the whole dispute about the objectivity of values, as it is ordinarily conducted, is pointless and idle” (Ayer 1949: 179; emphasis added). The italicized phrase is crucial here. As Ayer goes on to suggest, it is not pointless or idle to worry about whether ethics is objective, if what one is worried about is whether the things that one values really are valuable. The point is that the debate becomes pointless and idle if we transmute that worry into a metaphysical question about whether one’s values “reflect, or participate in, or are in some other mysterious way related to an objective world of values” (ibid., 179; emphasis added). Ayer explains why in a memorable passage:

The problem is not that the subjectivist denies that certain wild, or domesticated, animals, ‘objective values’, exist and the objectivist triumphantly produces them; or that the objectivist returns like an explorer with tales from the kingdom of values and the subjectivist says he is a liar. It does not matter what the explorer finds or does not find. For talking about values is not a matter of describing what may or may not be there, the problem being whether it really is there. There is no such problem. The moral problem is: What am I to do? What attitude am I to take? And moral judgments are directives in this sense. (1949: 179)

The point here is not that the ontological objectivist is saying something false, but that it doesn’t matter whether he’s saying something false, because the kind of claim he is making is wholly irrelevant to the kind of question we’re asking when we engage in moral practice.

In a later paper discussing J. L. Mackie’s famous argument for the error theory, Ayer says that what Mackie should have concluded is not that the sorts of properties that would ground ontological objectivity are unacceptably “queer,” but that the idea of ontological objectivity makes no sense in the moral case (Ayer 1984: 33-4). If we want to hold on to objective goodness, he

53 Ayer writes: “What puzzled me … is [Mackie’s] conclusion that the belief in there being objective values is merely false, as if the world might have contained such things, but happens not to, just as it happens not to contain centaurs or unicorns. Whereas I think that the conclusion to which his argument should have led him is that the champions of
says, we should understand it not in terms of the existence of certain kinds of properties, but rather in terms of “the principle that, in default of special reasons, no one person’s interests should count for more than anyone else’s” (ibid., 34). The question of whether morality is objective in this sense then becomes the question of whether to accept that principle. And that, Ayer says, is a practical question, not an ontological one (ibid.).

Ayer’s guiding concern here is not about the high costs of moral ontology, but about the distinctive nature of moral problems, and about the inability of a certain kind of thinking to successfully address those problems. His central point is that the questions we face when we are engaged in moral practice are essentially practical, and that answering these kinds of questions goes beyond merely describing things as having certain properties. Since we clearly do ask and answer questions of this kind, we must have concepts whose function is not wholly descriptive – we must have concepts that are essentially tied to active states of doing and endorsing. This is what Ayer has in mind when he suggests that something’s “having value [implies] not merely that it answers to a certain description but that it has some claim upon us” (ibid., 178; emphasis added). One might of course respond that the description a valuable thing satisfies is precisely the description of “having some claim upon us,” but that would miss the point. The point is that merely saying this will not help us to understand the nature of normative judgment. Indeed, saying this is likely to distort our understanding of those judgments, insofar as it encourages us to think of them in robust representationalist terms, as something like attempts to “reflect a world of values.”

It is here that we can begin to see the deep connection between the concern about ontological notions of correctness and objectivity being out of place in the normative domain, and

---

objective values have failed to make their belief intelligible” (33). Here and elsewhere we should read ‘objective values’ as ‘objective values as ontological objectivists understand them’.
the concern about having an account of normative judgment that correctly captures the way that normative judgments “motivate” us. These are two sides of the same coin. This can be hard to see when the concern about motivation is understood, as it usually is, in terms of a question about how normative attitudes could motivate us if they were beliefs.\(^{54}\) I believe the concern is better understood in terms of the kind of question that normative judgments are supposed to answer for us, and about the inability of a certain kind of thinking to answer those questions. Ayer puts the point this way:

if [an] ethical term is understood to be normative, then it does not merely describe [an] alleged non-natural property, and if it does merely describe this property, then it is not normative and so no longer does the work that ethical terms are supposed to do. … Those who talk of non-natural qualities … [leave us] with the further question whether what is so described is \textit{to be valued}; and this is not simply equivalent to asking what character it has, whether natural, or non-natural, whatever that may mean. (Ayer 1949: 178-9; emphasis added).

Ayer puts the point here in terms of ethical language, but I find it clearer to talk about concepts. The “work” that ethical concepts are “supposed to do” is precisely to figure in answers to practical questions. They are supposed to settle our thinking about what to do. And the problem is that if ethical concepts were merely descriptive – or, as I would prefer to put it, if deploying those concepts in an act of judgment were simply a matter of trying to get one’s mind to stand in a “representation relation” to some bit of worldly stuff – then ethical judgments would not be able to answer the questions that we need them to answer. We would always be left with further questions once we have made our normative judgments, and we would then have to create new concepts with which to pose our answers to those questions. But then \textit{those} would be the concepts

\(^{54}\) Shafer-Landau (2003: 22) again nicely captures the way of understanding the concerns about motivation that I am here opposing. He says: “On a broadly Humean theory of motivation, which is accepted by all non-cognitivists … beliefs alone cannot motivate. Yet moral judgments alone can motivate. Therefore moral judgments are not beliefs.” Compare (Schroeder 2010: 9-10).
that we have reason to care about and to be interested in, in the way that we care about and are interested in the concepts that we used to call ‘ethical’ or ‘normative’.

I believe that this line of reasoning is basically sound, if a bit compressed. I will try to develop it further in Chapter 3. For now, though, I want to round out the current narrative with a few brief observations about Stevenson and Hare. The guiding ideas that I have been drawing out of Ayer can be found throughout their writings, but here I’ll just give a couple of examples that I hope will be illuminating.

When Stevenson first introduced his approach to meta-ethical theorizing, he attempted to motivate it by pointing out a flaw with alternative, “interest-based” approaches. The flaw was that these alternative approaches “hold that ethical statements are descriptive of the existing state of interests … ethical judgments are said to describe what the state of interests is, was, or will be, or to indicate what the state of interests would be under specified circumstances” (Stevenson 1937: 18). His primary objection to such views was that they would always have “incomplete relevance,” in the sense that they wouldn’t allow us to say all that we want to say by using ethical language (ibid., 16). If ethical terms were simply descriptive of people’s interests, Stevenson says, that would deprive them of their “major use,” which is to “recommend an interest in an object, rather than state that the interest already exists” (ibid., 16).

55 See (Stevenson 1937: 11) for Stevenson’s explanation of relevance, which has to do with whether a proposed definition of a term allows those who have understood it “to say all that they then want to say by using the term in the defined way.”

56 Stevenson also says that the major use of ethical terms is to “create an influence,” or to “modify” someone’s interests (ibid., 16). This is not the best way of putting the point, though, for reasons that Hare explained in an early criticism of Stevenson (Hare 1951: 210ff.). There is an important difference between trying to cause a change in someone’s behavior or interests, and telling her something that is such that, if she accepted it, she would thereby change her behavior or interests. In the same way, when we tell someone “what the world is like,” we need not be trying to cause a certain change in her beliefs, although we are telling her something that is such that, if she accepted it, she would thereby change her beliefs in the relevant way.
We should understand Stevenson’s remarks about normative attitudes not being mere beliefs in non-natural properties in light of this. The thought, once again, is that normative judgment has to be something *more* than an attempt to form a certain kind of representation. “[M]oral judgments *go beyond* cognition,” Stevenson says, in “speaking to the conative-affective natures of men” (1944: 13; emphasis added). “The process of making an ethical decision is *something more,*” he says, “than the process of formulating factual beliefs” (ibid., 133; emphasis added). And the problem is that we won’t understand that *something more* if we augment our worldview with special kinds of properties and think of normative judgments as attempts to represent those properties. Stevenson’s key reason for resisting talk of non-natural properties is not that they are unacceptably “queer” or “unscientific,” but that “[t]he distinguishing features of an ethical judgment can be preserved by a recognition of emotive meaning and disagreement in attitude, rather than by some nonnatural quality—and with far greater *intelligibility*” (Stevenson 1948/1963: 9; emphasis added).

To be sure, Stevenson, like Ayer, was a committed empiricist. And so he probably did think that there was something objectionably mysterious about the idea of a non-natural property. My point is just that this does not get to the heart of these philosophers’ concerns about non-natural properties. The underlying problem here is not one that we could solve by simply giving up on empiricism and opening our ontology to an additional layer of properties. The problem calls for a different kind of solution – it calls for a particular way of understanding normative judgment – and once we have that solution, questions about whether normative properties or truths could plausibly count as “occupants of our world” will begin to seem out of place.

This idea is central to Hare’s prescriptivist treatment of moral judgment and moral objectivity. At the heart of Hare’s thinking on these issues is the idea that moral judgments are
supposed to “prescribe or guide choices,” and that in order to do this they must be capable of “entail[ing] an answer to some question of the form ‘What shall I do?’” (Hare 1952: 29). As I would prefer to put it, a moral judgment ought to be the sort of thing that does not leave you with further questions about what to do. In the most basic case, judging that you ought now to do X should settle for you the question of whether to do X. If you understand that judgment in some other way, you’ll then need some further sort of judgment for figuring out whether to do X; but that’s what your moral judgments were supposed to do.\(^57\)

Throughout his work Hare develops a complicated, quasi-formal system aimed at capturing this basic idea – one that he characterizes, misleadingly, I think, in terms of the “logic” of moral statements – which I won’t consider. The key point for our purposes is that once we understand normative judgments in the way Hare recommends – roughly, as expressions of a kind of practical state – we will be, as he puts it, “free from the need to engage in ontology of any sort in order to do ethics” (Hare 1985/1989: 93). Hare’s opposition to moral ontology – like Ayer’s and Stevenson’s – is grounded primarily in the thought that it is irrelevant, given the kinds of things that moral judgments are: a moral ontology is incapable of doing what philosophers want it to do, because moral judgments are not the sorts of things that could be “grounded” or “undermined” by non-moral claims about the existence or non-existence of certain kinds of properties or entities. That is why Hare says, not that moral properties or facts would be objectionably costly or queer, but that “we do not need to worry about whether moral facts or qualities exist,” and that “[a] philosopher who affirms that they exist has done absolutely nothing to solve the main problem” (ibid., 92, 93; emphasis added).

\(^{57}\) I take the line of thought here to be essentially the same as that outlined above in connection with Ayer (pp. 42-43); again, it is one that will be more fully developed in Chapter 3.
In other work – particularly in his books *Freedom and Reason* (1963) and *Moral Thinking* (1981) – Hare goes on to develop his own view about what moral objectivity amounts to, which is grounded in the Kantian idea that moral judgments are governed by a kind of practical logic that determines when it is rational to make them or not.\(^{58}\) I find this idea problematic, and I do not believe that it is forced on us by the basic insight that I have been trying to recover here.\(^{59}\) I would say the same about many of the other ideas that can be found in Ayer and Stevenson as well. My aim here has not been to endorse, nor even to discuss, all aspects of these philosophers’ views. I have simply been trying to isolate one important part of their view that I think is interesting and important, and whose significance has not been properly appreciated in contemporary metaethical discussions. The basic insight is that moral judgments are essentially practical, and that questions about their correctness and objectivity have to be properly sensitive to this fact.

1.6 Conclusion

I would like to conclude by drawing some general lessons from the story I’ve been telling, and saying a bit about how I see quasi-realism fitting into the narrative.

I have been arguing that we can get a better understanding of the non-cognitivist tradition by thinking of it as an attempt to work toward a kind of practical cognitivism. In my view, the development of that tradition is best understood as a kind of philosophical struggle: it is an attempt to make room for the idea of a practical question, and corresponding notions of practical thought

---

\(^{58}\) Hare’s view is similar, in this respect, to the kind of *constitutivist* view recently developed by Christine Korsgaard (Korsgaard 2009).

\(^{59}\) To be a bit more specific: it’s not the very idea of a “practical logic” that I find problematic. It’s the suggestion that we can, and must, derive *all* of our normative commitments from the logic of agency (or, in Hare’s case, from the logic of universalized preference) if we are to be fully rational in our use of normative concepts. I believe that practical logic can place important constraints on our normative thinking, but that we need more than logic to answer many important normative questions.
and practical content, within a theoretical framework that cannot easily accommodate these things. The philosophical climate in which Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare were writing was very much under the shadow of logical positivism (Ayer himself of course being one of the chief proponents of that program), and as a result certain ways of talking were for them infused with presuppositions that we would nowadays be inclined to reject. Many of those presuppositions had to do with the nature of content, in the sense of what is believed or thought or said. Ayer and Stevenson explicitly cite Ogden and Richards’ *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) as providing the basic framework within which they sought to develop their insights about normative judgment, and Ogden and Richards thought of meaning, or at least “referential” meaning, as essentially consisting in a relation between a (use of a) sign and some bit of physical reality. Many philosophers nowadays – certain naturalists perhaps being the exception – would agree that normative thoughts are not to be understood in that way. But I believe that many of them still hold to this basic model, substituting “non-natural properties” for “some bit of physical reality.” That, indeed, is what underlies the theoretical cognitivist’s sense that there must be some normative stuff out there that could make our normative judgments correct. The thought is that normative judgments, by their very nature, purport to refer to some non-natural stuff – that’s just what it is for them to be thoughts with normative content – and that if reality doesn’t contain this non-natural stuff then our normative judgments cannot really be correct. The early non-cognitivists were not willing to make this substitution – not, as we have seen, because doing so would be unscientific, but because it would yield a picture of normative thinking as something that it isn’t: as an attempt to get one’s mind to

---

60 See, e.g., (Stevenson 1937: 18), (Ayer 1984: 28-9). Ogden and Richards distinguished between “referential” meaning, which they thought should be “paramount” for “all reflective, intellectual use of language,” and all other ways in which a word might have “non-symbolic” effects on thought, which they lumped together as ‘emotive’ and thought of chiefly as “disturbances” (see, e.g., (Ogden and Richards 1923: 10)).
stand in a substantial relation of representation to some existing bit of worldly stuff, rather than an attempt to figure out what to do.

The difficulty of making room for a type of thinking with genuinely practical content within this sort of philosophical framework can be seen in what these philosophers occasionally thought they had to deny in order to make their points. They thought that they had to deny things that can seem like common-sense, at least on one way of understanding them: that normative judgments express beliefs, or that they state facts, or that they are descriptive, or even (in the case of the early Ayer) that they are meaningful. But it is vital to keep in mind how these philosophers were understanding beliefs, facts, descriptions, meaning, and so on when they said these things. And we should remember as well Ayer’s remark that “it is no doubt correct to say that the moralist does make statements,” and that it is the philosopher who is using words unconventionally when he says “that ethical statements are not really statements at all” (Ayer 1949: 172). Because while it is obviously objectionable to deny that normative judgments express beliefs, or that they are descriptive, or fact-stating, or meaningful in the “ordinary sense,” it is not obviously objectionable to deny that they express beliefs, or are descriptive, or fact-stating, etc., in the way that the theoretical cognitivist understands these things. And that, I think, is the best way of capturing what these philosophers were getting at with their negative claims about normative judgment.

The fact that we can think about what to do – the fact that there is a determinate subject matter there, about which we can ask genuine questions and entertain possible answers – ought to be enough to dislodge the thought that representationalism gives us a viable model for understanding the contents of all of our thoughts. I believe that the way forward is to begin by acknowledging this, and to insist that normative judgments do have genuine content – and so in a sense they do “state possible facts” or “describe how things might be,” or anything else that we
might want to say along these lines – but to think of their content as essentially *practical*, and to understand the corresponding claims about “fact-stating” or “describing” in light of this. Normative judgments have content: it is the kind of content that we have in view when we face questions like “What am I to do here?”, or “How am I to proceed with him?” We need to understand questions like these, and the states of mind that we come to be in when we answer them, in order to understand normative content.

I understand the quasi-realist project as aiming to provide this kind of explanation. The main point of that project is not, as it is commonly understood, to show that we can preserve certain ways of talking, although Blackburn does often speak that way. The point is not, for example, to start off by denying that there really are such things as moral propositions or moral judgments, and then to show that we can still “speak the language” of proposition and judgment in the moral domain. Rather, as Blackburn says:

> The point is that showing *how there can be* propositions of this kind is just the difficulty. The trick will be to show that this can be true. But *that* will take all the work that quasi-realism tries to carry out … In each case propositional behavior needs description, explanation, and sometimes defence. … [M]y instinct is to start, with Kant, as far back as possible: how *can there be* such a thing as moral … judgment? (Blackburn 1993b: 367-8)\(^6\)

The idea here is not to *deny* that moral judgments are genuine judgments, or that they have propositional content, but rather to *explain* these things in a particular way – without appealing at the outset to the idea that such judgments “represent moral reality” in the way that the theoretical cognitivist suggests. To put the point more generally, in terms of the distinction I made above

---

\(^6\) The ellipses omit another interesting aspect of Blackburn’s presentation of quasi-realism here, which ties it to an attempt to resist certain forms of *skepticism* about moral thought. The thought, as I understand it, is something like this: if we understand moral thought as the theoretical cognitivist does, we will make moral thinking vulnerable to a kind of skepticism that it shouldn’t be vulnerable to. The argument I present in Chapter 6 can be seen as one way of developing this idea.
between two kinds of cognitivism: the interesting question is not whether a certain cognitivist thesis is true, but how to understand the fact that it is true. As Blackburn says in Ruling Passions, there is nothing wrong with talking about, e.g., moral truth and representation,

[b]ut the commitments [involved in moral thinking] must first be understood in other terms. … Our understanding of the kinds of activity involved in specific, ethical states of mind remain[s] in place, driving the construction of the moral proposition. If we started and finished with a special, sui generis representation of moral aspects of the world, we would be drawing a blank. (Blackburn 1998: 80)

And later in the same work:

What is needed … is not the suggestion that evaluative predicates refer to whatever properties ground the values. We need to understand the special take on those properties had by those who value them one way or another. Until we have a theory of that, we do not understand anything of ethical thought, the content of the ethical proposition, its motivational power, its authority, and the question of whether disputes involving different valuations are cognitive disputes or something else. (Blackburn 1998: 121)

Earlier, when Blackburn is characterizing the “special take” that properties have on those who value them, he says things like this:

Ethics is a practical subject, manifested in our reactions to things and the motivations we feel. Ethics puts pressure on our choices, and we use ethical considerations to guide the choices of others. The practical role of ethics is what defines it. This is what ethics is for. If there is such a thing as ethical knowledge, it is a matter of knowing how to act, when to withdraw, whom to admire, more than knowing that anything is the case. (Blackburn 1998: 1)

“The ethical proposition,” he later says, “gets its identity as a focus for practical thought, as people communicate their certainties, insistences, and doubts about what to value” (ibid., 50). I take these remarks to be very much in line with the suggestion above about how to understand normative content. The idea is to start with the practical states involved in valuing things, and to move from there to an understanding of the kind of content one has in view when one judges that something is valuable.
Although Blackburn originally made these points in misleading terms, e.g., by talking about values being “projected” onto the world, he now sees that this was misleading. In a more recent paper, Blackburn says that the essential task of quasi-realism is not to “imitate” some form of realism, but rather

that of getting from some kind of doing, now thought of as the function of the sayings in question, to being comfortable with their assertoric status or propositional clothing—their fit into the domains of truth and falsity. And this territory must be crossed without supposing that the doing in question is one of responding to an environment of an enriched kind... (Blackburn 2010: 178)62

I take this to be in the spirit of – indeed, a clarification of – Blackburn’s earlier characterization of quasi-realism, in Ruling Passions, as an attempt to “understand the ethical proposition as a focus for practical thought,” and of his suggestion that ‘practical functionalism’ would be a more accurate name for the approach that he and Gibbard share (Blackburn 1998: 77).

Gibbard makes similar claims in his more recent work.63 In Thinking How to Live, for example, he explains the basic strategy of expressivism like this:

The expressivists’ strategy is to change the question [i.e., the question of what normative terms mean]. Don’t ask directly how to define ‘good’, for no correct definition can break out of a normative circle … Instead of seeking a straight definition, expressivists propose, seek a characterization of a different form. Ask what states of mind ethical statements express. … Equivalently, shift the question to focus on judgments: ask, say, what judging that compassion is good consists in. (Gibbard 2003: 6)64

And Gibbard’s key hypothesis is that, if we think of (say) the judgment that compassion is good as a kind of practical state – what Gibbard calls a “planning state” – we will be better able to

62 Compare (Blackburn 1993a: 4).

63 In earlier work Gibbard denied, e.g., that normative statements attribute properties, that they have truth conditions, and so on (e.g., (Gibbard 1986), (Gibbard 1990: 8, 10, 92)). He later retracted these claims (Gibbard 2003; see esp. p. 62).

64 See also (Gibbard 2003: 62, 75, 82, 194). For some other explicit characterizations of expressivism which eschew the familiar negative theses associated with that view and characterize it instead as a certain kind of explanatory project, see, e.g., (Gibbard 2011: 35, 48), (Gibbard 2012: Ch. 10 passim), and (Gibbard 2015: 211-12).
understand the special kind of content that judgment has. Normative content “emerge[s],” on this approach, from a story that starts with “questions of what to do, questions we answer by deciding what to do” (ibid., 20; emphasis added). The crux of that story — what makes the whole thing work, on Gibbard’s view — is that “thinking what to do remarkably parallels thinking, prosaically, how things are” (ibid., 112). And it is an emphasis on these parallels that Gibbard takes to be at the heart of his quasi-realism: “A quasi-realist like me stresses the vast extent of the parallel between normative convictions, as they emerge in the theory, and the plainest cases of belief in realistic content” (ibid., 181). Once again, the point is not to start off by denying that normative judgments are real judgments with genuine content, or denying that they are beliefs, or that they state facts, etc. The point is rather to explain these things in a particular way — by starting “within the realm of practical thinking,” and not understanding such thinking in the first instance in terms of “apprehensions or misapprehensions of facts of a special kind” (ibid., 55). 65

On this way of thinking about quasi-realism, when Blackburn and Gibbard attempt to “earn their right” to the “propositional surface” of normative thought and talk, they are not attempting to give an account of why we can treat normative attitudes as if they were beliefs with genuine propositional contents; they are giving an account of what it is for an attitude to be a belief with normative content.66 The same point applies for many of the other claims that quasi-realist

---

65 As before, the point about “apprehending facts” needs to be handled carefully. Gibbard allows that there are normative facts in the sense of “true thoughts” (e.g., ibid., 182). As for whether these are “real facts,” or whether normative judgments express “genuine beliefs,” etc., he says: “Explain to me ‘real facts’, ‘substantial truth’, and ‘genuine belief’, and I can think how to answer. … [W]e should at least find these distinctions suspect, and not help ourselves to them until they have been explained and vindicated… When they are … I must then return to these questions of whether normative facts, truth and belief are pseudo or genuine” (ibid.). Clearly it cannot be essential to this project to start off by denying the genuineness of normative facts, truths, or beliefs.

66 Compare (Blackburn 2010: 172-3) “[W]e have to look below the surface, to see what belief amounts to in this area or that.”
expressivists are often thought to deny, e.g., that normative terms function like normal predicates, or that they pick out properties, or that they are used to describe things, etc. Here is Gibbard again:

I myself accept … that … the term ‘wrong’ works as a normal predicate. [This claim], though, needs explaining… (Gibbard 2003: 61)

We describe the world as having non-natural qualities. Such descriptions can be legitimate and true. I say this last as an active being who agrees with some plans and disagrees with others. (Gibbard 2012: 19)

I am happy to call [normative] judgments ‘beliefs’. My account explains why they obey the principles of logic and other platitudes. All this stems … from the possibility of disagreement in plan. (Gibbard 2012: 230)

I take these remarks, again, to suggest that Gibbard’s concerns as a quasi-realist are primarily explanatory, rather than “corrective” in the way that the familiar understanding of quasi-realism suggests. The idea is not to start by denying some cognitivistic thesis, and then to avoid difficulties by preserving our right to talk as if that thesis were true. The idea is rather to start by accepting that thesis, and then to explain it in a certain way – and to do this in a way that sheds light on the practical character of normative thought and language.

That is very much in the spirit of the view I’m calling ‘practical cognitivism’. Normative judgments, on this view, have all of the important features that are commonly associated with cognitivism, and since the term ‘cognitive’ derives its meaning and significance in these discussions from its use in attributing such features to a discourse or practice, we might as well simply say that normative judgments are cognitive (or that they express cognitive attitudes). The next question is why that’s so. What is it about normative thinking that makes it a kind of cognitive enterprise? How should we understand such things as truth, knowledge, disagreement, and so on in the normative domain? And the constraint that the practical cognitivist places on an answer to

---

67 See also (ibid., 211): “[P]lanning, in my sense of the term, counts as a kind of believing” and (ibid., 212): “‘[D]isagreement in plan’ is genuine disagreement of the same kind as pertains to beliefs.”
these questions is that it had better not leave us with a picture of normative judgment which makes it mysterious how they could play the role that they clearly do play in guiding and regulating our active lives, by allowing us to ask and answer practical questions.

My aim in this chapter has been partly philosophical and partly historical/interpretive. I have been trying to excavate what I think are some important insights from the so-called “non-cognitivist” tradition, and to put them in a serviceable form by recasting the traditional debate between cognitivism and non-cognitivism in terms of a distinction between two different kinds of cognitivism: theoretical and practical. Naturally, my reading of the non-cognitivist tradition has been selective (but then again, so is the more mainstream reading). My guiding concern has been to highlight, and to try to better understand, some crucial aspects of that tradition that seem difficult to square with the familiar narratives about where non-cognitivism comes from and what it aims to accomplish. The insights that I have tried to recover from that tradition – about the essentially practical nature of normative inquiry, on the one hand, and about the irrelevance of certain kinds of ontological questions for that inquiry, on the other – will be developed and put to work in the rest of the dissertation.

---

68 One aspect that I have omitted here is that Blackburn and Gibbard do sometimes seem, especially in their earlier writings, to have the kinds of concerns about “ontological inflation” that I dismissed in the context of Ayer, Stevenson, and Hare. I don’t think this matters all that much, because these philosophers are also motivated by what I think of as the real worry here – the one about the irrelevance of purely ontological questions – and my main point is that concerns about ontological inflation do not capture the heart of that worry.
Chapter 2

Practical Questions and Practical Commitments

2.1 Taking stock

In the previous chapter, I argued that the non-cognitivist tradition is best understood as working towards a particular kind of cognitivist view — one that I called practical cognitivism. My aim in this chapter is to introduce the version of this view that I find most promising, and to begin clarifying its basic commitments.

According to practical cognitivism, normative judgments express cognitive attitudes that are fundamentally a kind of practical state. These attitudes are cognitive in the sense that they’re the sorts of things can figure in the cognitive activity of asking and answering questions, and in the sense that they’re capable of being correct, or getting things right. And these attitudes are practical in the sense that they aim to answer questions that are irreducibly practical in nature — the sorts of questions we face when we are engaged in deliberation and decision-making, and the sorts of questions we haven’t fully answered until we have adopted a particular kind of active orientation toward the world. Given that these attitudes bear all the standard marks of cognitive attitudes (e.g., truth-aptness, disagreement-aptness, knowledge-aptness, etc.), it would be confusing to insist that they are nevertheless “not really beliefs.” From here on out, then, I will freely refer to these attitudes as ‘normative beliefs’. The practical cognitivist thinks that normative beliefs are a special kind of belief: they are beliefs that are fundamentally a kind of practical state.

But we should note one complication here. ‘Belief’ is often used to refer to a standing disposition of the agent, which may be either conscious or unconscious, endorsed or unendorsed (as in the case of “recalcitrant beliefs”), direct or second-hand (as when we accept something solely
on the basis of someone else’s say-so), and so on. Things get very messy here, and there are many cases where we will want to say both that an agent sort of believes something and that she sort of doesn’t.\(^1\) For the most part I will be avoiding the messy cases and focusing on what I think of as the paradigm case of normative belief, which involves the agent’s consciously judging for herself that (say) she ought to do something. This is not because I think the messiness of ordinary belief is unimportant, but because I think we can best understand the nature of normative belief by focusing on the paradigm case – the case where an agent has the belief fully in view, as we might say – and explaining other, less clear-cut cases by reference to it. I will have a bit more to say about the messy cases in Chapter 4, when I broach the topic of akrasia. For now, though, the primary focus will be on (paradigm cases of) normative judgment.

Different versions of practical cognitivism will develop the view’s core idea in different ways, and much will depend here on how one conceives of practical thought – i.e., how one thinks about the asking and answering of practical questions. This helps to shed light on some of the differences between various versions of non-cognitivism and expressivism – e.g., emotivism, prescriptivism, sentimentalism, and plan-based expressivism – as well as a version of practical cognitivism that I have not yet discussed, namely Christine Korsgaard’s version of Kantian constructivism.\(^2\) Although these views diverge in many respects, they all share a common commitment to the idea that normative thinking is fundamentally practical, and many of their

---

\(^1\) For discussions of what look like “in-between” cases of belief, see (Zimmerman 2007), (Gendler 2008a; Gendler 2008b), (Schwitzgebel 2010), and (Mandelbaum 2013).

central differences can be traced to differences in how their proponents think about practical reasoning.

For example, as I suggested above, Ayer and Stevenson – in their early writings, at least – thought that normative attitudes were emotions or feelings because they assumed that reasoning could not be practical unless it involved being moved by emotions or feelings. Hare thought normative attitudes were a kind of prescription because he thought that practical reasoning was a matter of figuring out what to prescribe (Hare 1952, Ch. 1). Blackburn thinks that they are sentiments of a certain kind because he thinks that practical reasoning consists in having various forms of emotional and behavioral pressure exerted by one’s sentiments (Blackburn 1998, esp. Chs. 3, 8). Gibbard thinks that they are “plans,” which are a kind of hypothetical decision, because he thinks that only something like a decision could successfully answer a practical question (Gibbard 2003, esp. Ch. 1). And Korsgaard thinks that they are states of reflective endorsement, because she thinks that reflective endorsement is needed to answer the basic practical question that arises from our “plight” of being self-conscious agents who are aware of their inclinations and who have to make up their minds about what to do (Korsgaard 1996; 2009). All of these philosophers agree that normative judgments express a kind of practical state; what they disagree about is what kind of practical state those judgments express. And these differences can be traced to more fundamental differences in how they understand practical thought.

In the next section I’ll begin weighing in on this intramural debate about the kind of practical state we should take normative judgments to express. I’ll identify a crucial property that the relevant practical states must have, and I’ll try to explain how I think we should understand those states. I’ll then proceed to fill out the account by saying a bit more about the contents of normative judgments. Once I have done all of that, we’ll be in a better position to appreciate one
of the key motivations behind practical cognitivism, which I’ll develop by articulating what I will call ‘the residual-questions argument’ against alternative views (Chapter 3).

2.2 Practical questions and practical commitments

According to practical cognitivism, normative judgments express cognitive attitudes that are fundamentally a kind of practical state. What kind of practical state? The discussion so far has helped to illustrate one important constraint on the kind of state we can appeal to here: at the very least, it must be the sort of state that could plausibly be said to constitute the agent’s view about what to do. In other words, it must be the sort of state that is such that, when you come to be in it, you thereby count as having answered a practical question. That much is required for the attitude to be cognitive in the sense elucidated above (§1.3).

Compare a case of “ordinary belief.” When you come to believe that it’s raining outside, you thereby count as having answered the question of whether it’s raining outside. The practical states that are expressed by normative judgments must be like this, too, except that the questions they “answer” are practical – they are questions about (various aspects of) what to do.

Not just any kind of practical state or conative attitude can play this role. This is part of the reason why the “mere feelings” account suggested by early remarks of Ayer and Stevenson was so woefully inadequate. As I put the point above, simply having an “aura of feelings” hovering around in your mind is not the sort of mental going-on that could constitute a kind of cognitive activity. Or, to put it in the terms of the present discussion: simply having such an aura of feelings

---

3 I use scare quotes around ‘answer’ because some might find it odd to speak of an attitude as answering a question, as opposed to speaking of an agent who answers a question by forming the relevant attitude. I do think the latter is the more perspicuous way of speaking, but for the sake of brevity I will continue to speak of attitudes (and judgments) as answering questions. If you are worried about this, feel free to read ‘Attitude A answers question Q’ as shorthand for ‘Attitude A is such that an agent who has that attitude thereby counts as having answered question Q’.
hovering around in your mind is not a way of answering a practical question. To be sure, such an aura of feelings may prompt you to ask any number of practical questions. Feeling vaguely nostalgic, you might wonder whether to call an old friend, or you might wonder whether to endorse your longing for the pleasures of youth. But you will then have to do something else in order to answer those questions. You will have to make up your mind about whether to call an old friend, or whether to endorse your longing for the pleasures of youth. And doing that is different from simply having an aura of feelings hovering around in your mind.

But now consider, by contrast, the kind of mental state that’s involved in making a decision or a choice. This does seem to be the sort of thing that could constitute your answer to a particular question. Suppose you are wondering whether to do A or B, and after some deliberation you choose to do B. Then you have answered a question – the question, namely, of whether to do A or B. Your choice constitutes your answer to that particular practical question. Similarly, if you choose to call an old friend in the case described above, then you have answered one of the practical questions that your aura of feelings prompted you to consider – the question of whether to call an old friend.

Choice is importantly different in this respect from mere desire, inclination, passion, or sentiment. When I choose to do X, I thereby close off deliberation about whether to do X. If I then re-open that question at some later point, I thereby suspend my choice: I can’t be set on doing X in the way that’s characteristic of choice if the question of whether to do it is open for me. In

---

4 There is a difficulty in the very idea of a “mental state” here. I will speak of decision, choice, commitment, etc., as mental states that an agent can “form” or “have,” but I admit that such talk seems somewhat artificial when we are discussing aspects of practical life. Let me note that I do this only for convenience, so that I can more easily engage in dialogue with others who talk this way. I would be happy to drop the talk of states, though, and to characterize normative beliefs as aspects of the agent’s ongoing practical activity.

5 The word ’mere’ is important here, for reasons that I explain in the next two paragraphs.
that sense, at least, my choice seems to settle where I stand with respect to the question of whether
to do X.

The same is not true, however, for mere desires, inclinations, passions, or sentiments. I can
have a very strong inclination or desire to do X without thereby settling the question of whether to
do it. Similarly for being strongly motivated to do X, or being deeply attracted to doing it, or
feeling very passionate about doing it, and so on. Simply being in these states does not by itself
settle, for me, the question of whether to do X. Moreover, if I do settle that question and then at
some later point I re-open it, I do not thereby cease to have the relevant desires or inclinations.
Desires (inclinations, attractions, etc.) are importantly different from choices in this respect, and
this seems to make them much less suitable for the practical cognitivist’s purposes.

This is a general point about desires, passions, etc., considered just as such. There are
probably exceptions, though. There may be special kinds of passion or sentiment that are such that,
when an agent has them, she thereby counts as having answered some practical questions. Certain
kinds of love may be like this, for instance: it may be that, when you love someone (in the relevant
sense), you thereby count as having answered the question of whether to care about that person in
certain ways. The point is just that a further story will need to be told about why the relevant
passion or sentiment is capable of playing this role – why it is capable of answering practical
questions – given that passions and sentiments as such do not ordinarily do this. It seems natural
to think that such a story would end up construing the relevant passions or sentiments as involving

---

6 Others have made similar points in different contexts. See, for instance, (Korsgaard 1997, 1999) and (Wallace 1999). Compare also the familiar criticisms of Harry Frankfurt’s (1971) “higher-order desire” account of volition in (Watson 1975), (Watson 1987), and (Bratman 1996), which maintain (roughly) that volitions cannot be explained in terms of an agent’s higher-order desires, because desires as such do not have what Bratman calls “agential authority.” These criticisms seem to me to draw on a similar point to the one I am making in the text.

7 Re-opening the question may suspend the practical upshot of the inclinations (desires, sentiments, etc.), but it doesn’t get rid of the inclinations (desires, sentiments, etc.) themselves. This is the relevant contrast with choice.
an “active” or “volitional” element, thereby making them similar to choice, at least in this respect (e.g., love, or at least certain kinds of love, may involve an active commitment to caring for the person one loves).  

I thus believe that, at a certain level of abstraction, we can isolate the element of a passion or sentiment that makes it the sort of thing that is capable of answering practical questions, and that when we do this we will be focusing on something that can be appropriately described (though admittedly, at times, with some artificiality) as a kind of volition, or, as I will be putting it, as a kind of practical commitment. And I believe that it is best to focus on these kinds of states when we are engaged in the project of explaining normative judgments as answers to practical questions. In saying this, I do not mean to downplay the importance of passion, sentiment, emotion, or desire in our practical lives. Indeed, I believe that the proper cultivation of these kinds of states is essential for achieving a sound understanding of how to live. Having certain kinds of emotions can be a way of engaging in practical thought, and an agent’s views about what to do can sometimes be constituted by certain kinds of emotional states. But these states are able to function in this way in part because they involve an active or volitional element that makes them similar to choice. To the extent that some emotional state does not involve such an active element, it ceases to be the sort of thing that could plausibly be said to constitute the agent’s view about (some aspect of) what to do. For these reasons, I will focus primarily on choice in much of what follows – acknowledging, again, that other kinds of states are important, too.

I said above that, when you choose to call your friend, you thereby settle the question of whether to call him. More generally, we can say that whenever you make a choice, you thereby

---

8 For an example of an account of love that provides the kind of “further story” I have in mind here, see (Frankfurt 1998, Ch. 11) and (Frankfurt 2004).
answer some version of what I will call *the elementary deliberative question*, or the question of *what to do*. That is the starting point of the view I want to defend.

The elementary deliberative question is something that we can best understand “from the inside,” as beings who have to deliberate and make choices. It is a genuine question that I can and must ask, insofar as I am the sort of being who is capable of thinking about what to do. We can appreciate this by observing that, from my perspective as a deliberator, the movements of mind involved in deliberation and choice are not just blind causal happenings; they have a kind of *intelligibility* to me. I can express where I’m at in my deliberations – to myself, or to others who know what it’s like to deliberate – in terms of questions and answers. I can say that I’m unsure about what to do here, or that I don’t yet know how to proceed, and so on. To be unsure about these things is to be unsettled with respect to certain practical questions (e.g. *what to do*, or *how to proceed*, or, more specifically, *whether to do* X, or *how F-ly to do* Y, etc.). When I move from being unsure about such things to having a view about them, I come to have a kind of practical commitment (e.g., a commitment to doing X, or a commitment to doing so under certain circumstances).

Practical commitments have a kind of content to them, then, and this is not just predictive content about what the agent will do, or what she is likely to do. When you make a decision, you are not merely forming a belief about what you are going to do, or about what you are likely to do (though you may be doing that as well). You are settling on *doing* the thing, and when you do this your mind is not blank. You have a kind of orientation toward the action you have decided to do, one that you would find it natural to express by saying that that action is the one that you should do.
I realize that using normative language to characterize this thought will seem question-begging at this point, but it is difficult to find other language to use, and that is important. To be on the safe side, though, for the purposes of the present discussion we can momentarily use Gibbard’s locution ‘the thing to do’. When you decide to do X in a reflective, non-defective way, your mind is oriented toward X in a particular way, one that makes it appropriate to characterize you as thinking that X is the thing to do. If you wanted to verbalize that thought, the one you have in mind when you make the decision, you could do this by saying ‘X is the thing to do’. In doing so, you would be expressing a practical thought – putting it forward in public language, as something to be understood and assessed, shared or rejected by others.

That is one way of trying to give expression to the content of a decision, in the sense of what the agent is thinking when she makes the decision. What we are doing is, in effect, “transmuting” the mental state that someone is in when she makes a decision into something with declarative content. Doing this allows us to formulate and share thoughts in a form that would otherwise be unavailable to us.

Suppose one were to say that what the agent decides is to do X, and that her mental state thus has imperatival content but not declarative content. Decisions, she might then add, are importantly different in this respect from any genuine judgments about X.

As expressivists have long noted (see esp. Hare 1952 and Gibbard 2003), there are costs to going this way. If we do not think of decisions as the sorts of things that could be expressed in declarative sentences, then we will be severely limited in the kinds of thoughts we can formulate when we are reasoning about what to do, and we will not be able to make many claims that we need to be able to make. For one thing, we will be unable to give direct expression to what we think when we make decisions. We could say “I have decided to do X,” or “I’m going to do X,”
but those would be descriptions of my mental state, and not direct expressions of the thought that
I have in view, so to speak, when I’m in that mental state. It is as if I could only say “I believe
that it’s raining outside,” or “I have concluded that it’s raining outside,” but not simply “It’s raining
outside.” We need the latter thought, and the corresponding form of words, in order to talk about
the world, as opposed to simply talking about what various people believe about the world (which
is a different subject). The practical cognitivist insists that we need a similar thought, and a
corresponding form of words, in order to talk about what to do, as opposed to merely talking about
what various people have decided to do (which is, again, a different subject).

Nor could I formulate the question that I answer when I decide to do X, if I am unable to
express the thought I am having with declarative content. I could say, again, that I am wondering
whether to do X, or that I’m unsure about what to do, etc., but once again these would be
descriptions of me and my mental states, and not direct expressions of the question I am trying to
answer. “Do X?” is not grammatical, and “Am I to do X?” is already dangerously close to “Must
I do X?” or (one sense of) “Ought I to do X?”.

One might suggest “I shall do X” as an alternative possibility for saying what needs to be said here. This does get
closer to what we need, at least if it is read as an expression of decision and not merely a prediction about what I will
do. The trouble is that its form requires a reference to me, and it is thus unable to capture the pure practical thought
that I have in view when I make a decision, which (as I will argue in Chapter 5) has nothing essentially to do with the
fact that it is me who makes the decision.

Of course, our beliefs about the world are also a part of the world, and they might themselves be the subject of
discussion and belief. The point is that we need declarative content that gives direct expression to our thoughts in
order to talk about what we believe, rather than simply talking about what we believe.

There is room for debate about whether the sorts of contents being introduced here should be thought of as
propositions. I think it depends on what we mean by ‘proposition’. Mark Schroeder (2015) argues convincingly that
there are two separable notions of proposition at work in much contemporary theorizing – one of which is associated
with “ways the world might be,” metaphysically speaking, and one of which simply marks out the contents of thoughts
and utterances – and that the expressivist can and should embrace the latter notion of a proposition. I concur, although
I think it is important to recognize that the contents of these practical thoughts are importantly different in many
respects from the contents of non-practical thoughts, which philosophers typically have in mind when they talk about
propositions. But the two share enough features in common that they might as well both be called ‘propositions’.

---

9 One might suggest “I shall do X” as an alternative possibility for saying what needs to be said here. This does get
closer to what we need, at least if it is read as an expression of decision and not merely a prediction about what I will
do. The trouble is that its form requires a reference to me, and it is thus unable to capture the pure practical thought
that I have in view when I make a decision, which (as I will argue in Chapter 5) has nothing essentially to do with the
fact that it is me who makes the decision.

10 Of course, our beliefs about the world are also a part of the world, and they might themselves be the subject of
discussion and belief. The point is that we need declarative content that gives direct expression to our thoughts in
order to talk about what we believe, rather than simply talking about what we believe.

11 There is room for debate about whether the sorts of contents being introduced here should be thought of as
propositions. I think it depends on what we mean by ‘proposition’. Mark Schroeder (2015) argues convincingly that
there are two separable notions of proposition at work in much contemporary theorizing – one of which is associated
with “ways the world might be,” metaphysically speaking, and one of which simply marks out the contents of thoughts
and utterances – and that the expressivist can and should embrace the latter notion of a proposition. I concur, although
I think it is important to recognize that the contents of these practical thoughts are importantly different in many
respects from the contents of non-practical thoughts, which philosophers typically have in mind when they talk about
propositions. But the two share enough features in common that they might as well both be called ‘propositions’.
Similarly, to borrow an example from Gibbard (2003: 11), we can’t say

(1) If do X, then do Y as well.

Whereas we can say

(2) If I ought to do X, then I ought to do Y as well.

We need (2), or something like it, in order to engage in hypothetical reasoning about what to do.\(^\text{12}\)

The basic point here is that we will not be able to share practical thoughts, either with others, or with ourselves over time, unless we think of at least some practical states as having shareable practical content. We will not be able to engage in hypothetical reasoning about what to do unless we can formulate thoughts that are such that, when we come to accept them, we thereby settle some practical question. We need something that works like “Do X!”, in the sense that you haven’t fully accepted it unless you’ve decided to do X, but that can also figure in hypothetical practical reasoning (as in “If X is the thing to do, then so is Y”). Similarly, we will not be able to reason together unless we can formulate such thoughts and share them in a public language. We

\(^{12}\) One might insist that we can get around this problem by using, not (2), but

(3) If I’m going to do X, then do Y as well.

But this distorts the antecedent, which is supposed to be an expression of (hypothetical) decision, not a description of a possible mental state that I may or may not be in. The thought is not about whether to do Y given that I am going to do X, but about whether to do Y if (I see no other way to put it) I ought to do X, or if X is “the thing to do.” The antecedent has to be something that gives expression to the thought I would be having if I decided to do X, and “I am going to do X” doesn’t do that (at least not if it is a description of a mental state). To put the point another way, the thought that I am after with (1) is about whether Y is the thing to do on the assumption that X is the thing to do. It is not about whether Y is the thing to do on the assumption that I am going to do X. So (3) doesn’t capture the thought that one is trying to express by means of (1).
need ways of formulating these kinds of thoughts and expressing them in language, and the practical cognitivist’s claim is that this is what normative concepts and normative language are for. They allow us to formulate practical thoughts in a way that makes them shareable (both with ourselves over time and with other agents), and to express those thoughts in language.\textsuperscript{13}

Practical questions, and the various thoughts one might have as one tries to address them, are things that you can recognize and understand from the inside, as a fellow deliberator. They mark the contours of a deliberating mind, and since you have such a mind, you can explore those contours and see for yourself what the questions mean. From the outside, the process of asking and answering these questions can perhaps be described in terms of the “operation” of certain practical states, but from the inside the operation of those states has a kind of intelligibility, something that we can understand and describe in terms of questions and answers. The relevant practical states constitute a point of view from which you see the world as you are deliberating, and the thoughts that you are having when those states are operating have a kind of content – a content that is given in part by the impact they would have on your choices, if you let them.

The kinds of questions we are considering here are irreducibly practical, in the sense that you haven’t fully answered them until you have made up your mind about (some aspect of) what to do, which involves taking up a particular kind of active orientation toward the world. In what we might think of as the basic case, you have not made up your mind about what to do here and now until you have actively settled on a particular course of action, in the way that you do when you make a resolution or a choice. But making up your mind in this way is not limited to choosing

\textsuperscript{13} This is a somewhat misleading way of putting the point, since I don’t think there could be thoughts that are in principle unshareable. It is not as though we first have these thoughts, and then we invent normative concepts because we are looking for a way to express them. A more careful way of putting the point would be to say that normative language allows us to formulate practical thoughts, or that normative concepts allow our practical activity to take the form of thought.
to perform a certain action; it includes all of the other “moves” you might make in the course of deliberation, such as: *ruling out* some course of action, or ruling it out under certain conditions; *allowing* a certain kind of action, in the sense of not being opposed to it, or being “okay” with it;\(^{14}\) *giving weight* to certain kinds of considerations, or *resolving* to do so under certain conditions; resolving *not* to give weight to certain kinds of considerations, or (again) not to do so under certain conditions; and so on. All of these mental activities can be thought of, at a certain level of abstraction, as answering practical questions, questions that we face in the course of deliberating. When we answer these questions, we come to be in a certain kind of practical state, one that determines where we stand with respect to the relevant question.

For instance, when we *rule out* torturing under any circumstances, we come to be in a state that involves being opposed to torture, and also perhaps being opposed to considering torture as a viable option in one’s deliberation. This involves, among other things, a readiness to denounce, criticize, or resist others who go in for torture; to encourage others to rule out torturing; and so on.\(^{15}\) When someone is in this kind of practical state, we can say that she has answered the question of whether to torture (as well as the related questions of whether to criticize those who go in for torturing, whether to encourage others to rule out torturing, and so on). Similarly, when you decide to *allow* some course of action, you come to be in a state that involves a standing commitment to *permit* yourself or others to perform that action (all else being equal), to *refrain* from criticizing people simply for performing that action, and so on. When you decide to *give weight* to a certain consideration, you come to be in a state that involves a standing commitment to *treat* that

---

\(^{14}\) I adopt the language of “allowing” and “ruling out” from (Gibbard 2003).

\(^{15}\) Compare Blackburn’s “staircase of practical and emotional ascent” (Blackburn 1998: 9).
consideration as a reason, to criticize yourself or others for failing to take that consideration into account when deliberating, and so on (again, all else being equal).

I won’t have much to say here about the wide variety of practical states that can be involved in practical reasoning. The point is just to illustrate that there is such a variety, and that we can bring this into view by reflecting on the different kinds of moves we can make in the course of deliberating. Each of these moves can be understood as corresponding to a question you can ask yourself when you are deliberating. You can ask yourself not only what to do (here and now), but also what to rule out, what to allow, which considerations to give weight to, and so on. And you can get more specific: you can ask, not just what to rule out, but whether to rule out killing, or whether to rule out killing in cases of self-defense, and so on. These questions mark the contours of deliberation, and the various answers we might give to them mark out various ways in which we might come to be practically oriented toward the world.

A practical commitment, then, is the kind of mental state one comes to be in when one answers these sorts of questions. An agent’s practical commitments determine where she stands on practical matters of what to do. In the basic case, an agent’s choice determines where she stands with respect to one of the most basic practical questions we can ask: the question of what to do (here and now). In more complex cases, an agent’s practical commitments will determine where she stands with respect to such matters as what to praise and what to denounce; what to encourage and what to condemn; what to give weight to and what to ignore or set aside when deliberating; what to pursue and what to avoid; and so on.

2.3 Some qualifications
Before moving on, I want to briefly register a few qualifications. It is difficult to talk about exactly which practical questions an agent has answered, and exactly what is involved in answering them, without a fair amount of idealization. It was helpful, when introducing the basic idea above, to give the example of someone who rules out torturing under any circumstances; normally, though, we do not make such absolute prohibitions, nor do our other practical states range over precisely defined sets of circumstances. Our practical thinking is vague and open-ended in a variety of ways, and any attempt to model it precisely will involve some degree of artificiality.\textsuperscript{16}

There are at least three ways in which our practical commitments tend to be messier than an idealized characterization of them would suggest.

First, they may not involve a clear or precise specification of the relevant action. We may choose to do something without having a very precise sense of what would count as doing that thing; a general sense or a “feel” may suffice. For instance, we might choose to cultivate a certain virtue – we might resolve to be more courageous, say, – without knowing in advance exactly what would count as a successful cultivation of that virtue.\textsuperscript{17}

Second, and relatedly, our practical commitments may not involve a clear or precise specification of the relevant circumstances to which they pertain. We may resolve to be kind to

\textsuperscript{16} There is an important question here about the extent to which we might hope to improve our practical thinking in this respect. I won’t attempt to directly address this issue here, but I should mention that this is one place where Kant’s categorical imperative test seems to me to be of great use. Even for those, like me, who are skeptical about whether that test can deliver all that we want from a moral system, the test may still provide an excellent way to impose clarity and discipline onto our thinking, thereby helping to protect against the subtle and pernicious forms of inconsistency and special pleading to which we are naturally prone, and which are made all too easy by the vagueness and open-endedness of our ordinary practical thinking.

\textsuperscript{17} I don’t mean to suggest that we can make this kind of choice while leaving it wholly open-ended what would count as a successful cultivation of courage. I just mean that we can commit to the journey without having the whole road laid out before our mind’s eye in advance.
our friends, for instance, without having clearly worked out the precise circumstances under which such kindness is warranted or required.

Third, our practical commitments may be more or less “shallow” or “robust,” and they may interact with other practical and emotional states in complicated ways that make it difficult to say exactly what we are committed to and when. I will have more to say about this last complication later on, when I come to discuss akrasia, or weakness of will (Chapter 4). For now, though, I simply want to acknowledge some of the ways in which it can be artificial to think of ourselves as decisively answering fully determinate practical questions, such as the question of when to torture, or when to criticize others for torturing, etc. Despite this artificiality, thinking of ourselves in this way does give expression to something psychologically real, and it helps to illuminate crucial features of our mental lives as we engage in practical activity.

2.4 Further elucidations: the tie to our strong agential capacities

We can further elucidate the notion of a practical commitment by thinking about what is involved in asking and answering a practical question, and why we find it appropriate to think of ourselves as doing this. Here it is illuminating again to begin with the basic case – the case where an agent settles the question of what to do (here and now) by making a choice – because the active nature of the relevant practical state is most clearly on display in this sort of case. In paradigm, non-defective cases, an agent’s choice is a direct expression of her capacity to govern herself by making up her mind about what to do. In such cases the agent’s choice determines where she stands qua
agent, as the sort of being who is capable of actively engaging with the world by making up her mind about what to do.\textsuperscript{18}

Not all beings who engage in purposive activity are capable of making choices in this sense. There is a rich psychological context presupposed in talking about \textit{choice}, and the same goes for talking about the asking and answering of practical questions more generally. My cat has a standing disposition to wake me up shortly after sunrise, and he has predictable emotional and behavioral responses when he is unable to do so (e.g., he gets frustrated and meows). But it would be strange to say that this disposition \textit{expresses} my cat’s \textit{views} about whether to wake me up shortly after sunrise. This is not to say that the disposition is “brute” or “blind.” (On the contrary, it is a testament to his intelligence.) But my cat has not asked himself, nor could he ask himself, the question of whether to wake me up shortly after sunrise, and his standing disposition to wake me up at that time is not a practical commitment. Talk of practical questions and practical commitments seems out of place here, because my cat does not have the kind of psychology that could underwrite such talk and make it appropriate.\textsuperscript{19}

There are a number of stories one could tell about the rich psychological context that needs to be in place in order for talk of practical questions and practical commitments to be appropriate.

\textsuperscript{18} I’ve adapted this way of putting the point – in terms of a mental state that settles “where the agent stands” – from Bratman’s discussions of “agential authority” (Bratman 2007). Blackburn (2010: 299) cites this expression with approval in an expressivist context.

\textsuperscript{19} Things are probably much more complicated than I’ve made them out to be here. Let me just add, then, that while the remarks in the text seem plausible to me as a bit of armchair speculation about my cat, there are important philosophical and empirical questions here that I don’t intend to address. The claims in the text are meant to serve a purely contrastive function, by bringing out some important features of human practical activity which make it appropriate to think of ourselves as asking and answering practical questions. In the end it doesn’t matter for the points I’m making here whether those features are specifically human, or whether other animals have the sorts of mental lives that could plausibly be said to consist, in part, in the asking and answering of practical questions.
I don’t have a fully worked out view about this, but here are some facts that seem to make such talk appropriate in our case:

First, we are subject to a wide range of motivations, and we are typically aware of them. These motivations can and often do come into conflict, and we are typically aware of that, too.

Second, although we may sometimes act directly from some motivational state without much thought or reflection, we do not always do this. We are capable of reflecting on various possibilities for action and choosing one of them, not blindly, but for reasons.

Third, we have highly sophisticated conceptual abilities, and we can deploy these in order to articulate a wide range of possible objects of choice, including not just various types of action, but also various ways of performing such actions (e.g., slowly, quickly, thoroughly, etc.), as well as various conditions under which to perform them, or perform them differently, or refrain from performing them (e.g., do X quickly if the weather is nice, otherwise do it slowly; unless Y happens, in which case don’t do it at all). When we make a such a choice and successfully carry it out in action, our conceptual abilities help to structure and guide our practical activity. For instance, if you choose to make a thorough investigation of the contents of Miss Scarlet’s briefcase, your practical activity will be structured and guided by your ability to deploy the concepts *investigation*, *thorough*, *briefcase*, *contents*, and *Miss Scarlet*, and this is reflected in facts like this: if you learn that the briefcase you have been investigating is not actually Miss Scarlet’s, you will no longer see what you’ve been doing as a way of carrying out your choice, and you will change course accordingly (at least insofar as you are attempting to carry out your choice).\(^{20}\)

---

\(^{20}\) Of course, you might continue investigating the briefcase out of curiosity, or because you learn that it is Professor Plum’s briefcase, and you want to get some dirt on him (or something like that). But then you will no longer be engaging in the same activity (at least in one perfectly natural sense of ‘activity’, in which the activity that you are engaged in partly depends upon your sense of what it is that you’re doing).
Fourth – and this is a corollary of the previous point – when we do make a choice and carry it out in action, we are typically aware of what we are doing and why, and we could normally articulate this if someone asked us to (where ‘someone’ need not be someone else, but might simply be oneself at some later time).

Fifth, and finally, we are capable of carrying our choices through to completion even in the face of powerful conflicting motivations. This involves an ability to sustain our choice, staying on track at times when the object of choice ceases to seem as attractive or appealing as the incompatible alternatives presented by our conflicting motivations or desires. At such times our behavior is guided, not by a present sense of attraction to the thing we have chosen to do, nor by a felt desire to do the thing, but rather by the choice itself, or (if this is something separate) by the thoughts that went into its formation (i.e., the ones that express our reasons for choosing as we did).

All of these things seem to me important for understanding the psychological context that makes it appropriate to think of ourselves as asking and answering practical questions (and hence as making practical commitments). There are almost certainly others, and I don’t pretend to be providing a full story here.

We can summarize the discussion thus far as follows. There is a strong kind of agency that goes beyond merely purposive agency, one that is tied to our conception of ourselves as reflective, self-governing agents, and one that seems to be distinctively human. This is the kind of agency that is exhibited, paradigmatically, when we deliberately and wholeheartedly pursue a course of action out of reflective commitment – the kind that has, so to speak, “more of the agent in it” – and the kind that is lacking when (for instance) we behave from appetite in a way that we don’t fully endorse. It is the kind that makes us want to talk about things like “autonomy” or “deliberate
control.” Normal adult human beings have what we might call *strong agential capacities* – capacities that enable them to engage in this kind of reflective self-government – and *practical commitments* can be understood as the sorts of mental states that typically issue from the proper exercise of these capacities. To be in a mental state of this kind is to have a view about (some aspect of) what to do. And that view is something you can express by using normative language – for example, by saying, “I ought to do X,” or, “So-and-so ought to do Y.”

Think of our strong agential capacities as (roughly) capacities to govern ourselves in reflective and intelligent ways, so that our behavior is something that we fully stand behind, or fully endorse. And think of practical commitments as the states that we come to be in when we engage in this kind of self-governing. We are aware of various possibilities for action, and we are able to think about which ones to pursue, which ones to avoid, which ones to consider and which ones to rule out, which ones to encourage or denounce, which ones to praise or blame, and so on. Similarly, we are (typically) aware of the various desires, motives, and inclinations to which we are subject, and we are (sometimes) able to adopt various practical stances toward them: to endorse or identify with them, to reject or disavow them, to follow them or resist them, and so on. Sometimes we reflect on all of these things, and, upon reflection, we settle on a particular course of action, one that we fully endorse. That is the paradigm case of making a practical commitment, and our normative judgments express these kinds of commitments.

---

21 The astute reader will note that the latter example here (“So-and-so ought to do Y”) assumes that practical commitments can be *impersonal*, or *agent-invariant* (i.e., it assumes that I can have commitments that would be expressed as claims about what so-and-so (who is not me) ought to do). I do believe that we can make such commitments, but a full defense of this idea will have to await the discussion of correctness in Chapter 5.

22 Again, it is worth emphasizing that not all practical commitments are consciously adopted on the basis of explicit reasoning about what to do, just as not all beliefs are consciously formed on the basis of explicit reasoning about what to believe. There are gray areas in both cases, but in each case the phenomenon in question (practical commitment and belief) is best understood by reference to the paradigm case.
Reflective agency is the subject of much debate in the philosophy of action, and it is (of course) controversial how exactly it is to be understood. My aim here has not been to provide a fully detailed story about what such agency consists in, but simply to illustrate the abstract connections between questions about strong reflective agency and questions about the nature of normative judgment. That said, it is important to note one thing that the practical cognitivist cannot appeal to when attempting to fill out the details of such a story – namely, the ability to represent and respond to features of normative reality (in a robust sense of ‘represent’). The reason for this should be fairly clear. If our aim is to explain normative thinking in terms of the expression of practical commitments, and we are attempting to understand practical commitments, in turn, in terms of a kind of reflective agency, we cannot then explain that kind of agency in terms of our ability to represent and respond to normative reality. We must be able to explain reflective agency, then, without recourse to this kind of robustly representational story.

It is important to be clear about what exactly is being claimed here, though, in order to forestall a potential misunderstanding. It is plausible to think that our ability to engage in practical thinking requires an ability to make judgments about what we have reason to do. That is not what is being denied. The practical cognitivist accepts this point, and insists that this ability – the ability to make the relevant judgments about reasons – is a practical ability (roughly, an ability to decide whether to treat certain things as reasons in one’s practical deliberation), rather than a representational one. What is being denied is not that practical thinking requires an ability to make judgments about reasons, but rather a particular interpretation of what that ability consists in: one

23 For relevant discussions, see, e.g., (Velleman 2000), (Frankfurt 2004), (Watson 2004), (Wallace 2006), (Korsgaard 2008b, 2009).

24 For examples of this kind of robustly representational view of practical thinking, see (Enoch 2011, Ch. 9), (Raz 2011, Chs. 5, 7), and (Broome 2013).
which explains it, in the first instance, as an ability to form robust representations which purport to put one in touch with normative reality.

The need to make sense of strong reflective agency without appealing to this kind of robustly representational story places a non-trivial constraint on the development of practical cognitivism, but I see no reason to think that it can’t be met. Understanding our ability to ask and answer practical questions does not require thinking of ourselves as attempting to form robust representations that put us in contact with normative reality. To be sure, some philosophers do understand reflective agency in this way. But other options are available. Consider, for instance, Harry Frankfurt’s account of agency, which explains it in terms of higher-order volitions with which the agent is satisfied (Frankfurt 1988, 1998b); or Michael Bratman’s account, which explains it in terms of higher-order self-governing policies (Bratman 2007); or David Velleman’s account, which explains it in terms of self-fulfilling predictions (Velleman 2000); or Christine Korsgaard’s account, which explains it in terms of reflective endorsement and efficacious self-unification (Korsgaard 1996, 2008, 2009). All of these accounts provide different ways of making sense of reflective agency without having to think of ourselves as trying to act in accordance with robust representations of normative reality. We do not need to embrace any of these accounts in their entirety in order to be optimistic about the prospects of a non-representationalist account of reflective agency.

In the next two chapters, I will attempt to further elucidate the ideas introduced in this chapter by showing how they shed light on one of the main motivations behind non-cognitivist

25 Compare Gibbard’s (2003: 55) claim that we can understand an agent as making distinctions “within the realm of practical thinking” – e.g., between choosing to do something out of preference and choosing to do something out of indifference – without thinking of these as “apprehensions or misapprehensions of facts of a special kind.” (As always, the phrase ‘apprehensions of fact’ here must be understood here in terms of a “robust” notion of representation.) See also (Frankfurt 2006, e.g., pp. 30-34) and (Korsgaard 2008b, e.g., Ch. 7).
and expressivist accounts of normative judgment (Chapter 3), and showing how they allow us to avoid problems with akrasia that have plagued these accounts (Chapter 4). We will then be in a position to transition to questions of practical correctness and objectivity, which will occupy us for the rest of the dissertation.
Chapter 3
Motivation, Practicality, and Residual Questions

3.1. Introduction

As the preceding chapters will have made clear, I believe that questions about the nature of practical thought are absolutely central to the kind of metaethical project that non-cognitivists and expressivists (and, of course, practical cognitivists) have been engaged in.¹ This is something that has not been fully appreciated, in my view, in large part because the considerations about practicality that motivate this project have often been cast in a misleading form. That is the issue that I want to address in this chapter. In the course of doing so, I will have occasion to elucidate some of the ideas introduced so far, and to further illustrate how the distinction between theoretical cognitivism and practical cognitivism helps to re-orient our thinking about some central issues in metaethics.

3.2 Motivation

Discussions about the practicality of ethics are typically cast in terms of a problem about how ethical judgments motivate us. The problem is usually introduced in something like the following way. First, an observation: we generally expect people to be at least somewhat motivated to do what they think they ought to do, and we would be puzzled by someone who claimed to believe that she ought to do a certain thing if she had no motivation at all to do it. Second, a demand for

---
¹ As I suggested above (in Chapter 1), I believe that practical cognitivism best captures the guiding insights of the expressivist/non-cognitivist tradition, and I read the latter as an attempt to work toward the former. In this chapter, I will speak more or less interchangeably of expressivists, non-cognitivists, and practical cognitivists in order to engage more easily with the existing literature.
explanation: why should this be? What explains this reliable connection between ethical judgment and motivation?

Here are some typical statements of the problem that reflect this way of understanding it:

Intentions, it would seem, are one thing and evaluative judgments another. Still, the frequency with which we intend and act in accordance with our better or best judgments is far too great to be written off as mere coincidence. How, then, is this salutary frequency to be explained? (Mele 2001: 25)

Almost all of us … are moved at least to some extent to follow our evaluative judgments. … And we take ourselves to be rightly suspicious of those who consistently remain unmoved in the face of their moral affirmations. … Morality’s ability to move us is much more reliable than that of any other objective domain. This needs explaining. (Shafer-Landau 2003: 119)

We typically expect people to feel at least some motivation to do what they think they ought to do. … The problem is that this appears to make moral beliefs very different from other sorts of beliefs. … [I]n general, when you convince your friend of some ordinary, non-moral matter, there is nothing in particular that you expect that to motivate her to do … But moral questions are different. If you convince your friend that she ought to [do something], then … [y]ou expect her to have some motivation to [do it]. (Schroeder 2010: 10)

Moral motivation is a strikingly regular and reliable phenomenon. Throughout social life, in both our personal relations and our public interactions, we take it for granted that moral judgments dependably, if not unfailingly, motivate, that they effectively influence and guide how people feel and act. … The basic phenomenon of moral motivation seems relatively straightforward. The difficult philosophical task becomes one of attempting to understand and explain more fully and precisely the nature of moral motivation. (Rosati 2016; emphasis in the original)

At this point, the non-cognitivists or expressivists (or the practical cognitivists, as I want to call them) are supposed to come in and insist that their view offers the best response to this problem about motivation.

I want to start by noting two things about this way of setting up the problem. The first is that the issue about motivation is understood in an entirely third-personal, predictive/explanatory way. It is about certain patterns of expectation and puzzlement regarding the way that people behave – patterns that are grounded in the observed “frequency” or “reliability” with which people
tend to be motivated to act in accordance with their normative judgments. The second is that it is not at all obvious, on the face of it, why we would need to think of normative beliefs themselves as a kind of practical attitude in order to explain these things. All we need is a theory that can explain the expectation and the puzzlement. And there are lots of ways of doing that.

For instance, we could simply say – as seems plausible – that many people have very strong desires to do what they think they ought to do; hence, when they judge that they ought to do something, they tend to be motivated to do it. Or we could say that ought judgments tend to cause us to have certain desires, or to form certain intentions – perhaps adding that this is due to “some underlying neural mechanism” (Scanlon 2014: 54). And there are any number of stories we could tell about how normative language works that would explain our puzzlement about the normatively unmotivated. We could say, for instance, that normative utterances pragmatically convey the information that the speaker is in a certain motivational state, so that our expectations are frustrated when someone says he ought to do something but has no motivation to do it. Or we could say that there are usage conventions that make it infelicitous to say that you ought to do something when you are not motivated to do it. In general, there seems no reason to suppose we would need to identify normative beliefs with practical states in order to explain any of these things. To my mind, this suggests that we have got the problem wrong.

---

2 This is essentially what Peter Railton and David Brink do for moral motivation, although they would not characterize the relevant desires as desires to do what one thinks one ought (or what one thinks is right, etc.) (Railton 1986; Brink 1989; cf. Parfit 1997). Compare (Svavarsdottir 1999), who does characterize the relevant desires in this way. This was also W. D. Ross’s view; see, e.g., (Ross 1930: 134-156).

3 Scanlon also thinks that the issue here is not best understood in terms of a problem about motivation (see ibid., Lecture 3). His views about this are complicated, though, and I won’t try to engage with them directly here. For a critical discussion of Scanlon’s approach to practicality with which I am largely in agreement, see (Dreier 2015a, 2015b).

4 For suggestions along these lines, see for example (Copp 2009), (Railton 2009), (Strandberg 2011), and (Finlay 2014). As with some of the other references in this section, these authors are sometimes talking about specifically moral motivation.
It is sometimes suggested that what needs to be explained is why the connection between normative judgment and motivation is conceptual. This gets us closer to the real issue, but it is not going to convince anyone who’s thinking about motivation in the way that “externalists” in these debates are thinking about it (roughly, as a kind of causal pressure toward certain kinds of bodily behavior). What happens when we put the problem in this way is that people start describing wild scenarios and probing for intuitions about the “semantic competence” of the agents in those scenarios. Imagine someone who passes all the public “tests” for using the word ‘ought’ correctly, but who is not at all motivated to do what he says he ought to do. Do we have to think of him as being insincere in what he says, or as being mistaken about what the word ‘ought’ means? Surely not! Maybe he just doesn’t care! Internalists will claim that they can’t understand the case, and their opponents will say that they’re just doing that thing that philosophers do when they pretend they can’t understand something because it threatens to undermine their theory. We end up in a stalemate.

3.3 Practicality: a preliminary discussion

I believe that these debates about motivation have taken us down the wrong track. The interesting philosophical issue about practicality is not best understood in terms of a problem about how to explain some striking empirical regularity, or about how to account for the puzzlement we feel when we are confronted by the normatively unmotivated. It is about conceptual connections of a certain kind, but these connections are not the sorts of things we can test in the usual ways (e.g.,

---

5 Here an externalist is (roughly) someone who denies that there is a conceptual connection between normative judgment and motivation, and an internalist is (roughly) someone who insists that there is such a connection.

6 For examples of the externalist line here, see (Svavarsdottir 1999, 2006) and (Shafer-Landau 2003, Ch. 6). For an expressivistic example of the internalist reply, see (Gibbard 2003: 154-158).
by probing for intuitions of semantic competence). They are connections that have to be appreciated from the inside – that is, from the perspective of someone who uses normative concepts in her deliberations about what to do.

These conceptual connections are what Ayer and Stevenson were trying to bring out when they said that normative judgments have to “go beyond” mere description, and what Hare was trying to bring out when he said that normative judgments must have an irreducibly prescriptive element that cannot be fully understood in terms of the attribution of properties. The main idea here is difficult to articulate, but it also comes into view in passages like these:

The reason expressivism in ethics has to be correct is that if we suppose that belief, denial, and so on were simply discussions of a way the world is, we would still face the open question. Even if that belief were settled, there would still be issues of what importance to give it, what to do, and all the rest. … For any fact, there is a question of what to do about it. But evaluative discussion just is discussion of what to do about things. (Blackburn 1998: 70)

Descriptivism downplays choice, we expressivists complain. Properties are all, and acting an afterthought. This is equally the stance of naturalism and of non-naturalism. In thinking what to do, a theorist of either kind encounters the same question: how, on her view, do thoughts of what we ought to do bear on choice? … My choice may be left open, [descriptivists] agree, when all descriptive questions are settled and I know what I must do. At that point, I complain, such theorists leave us conceptually in the lurch, with no refined concepts for thinking my way to decision, and no refined language for thinking about it together. No subject matter addresses the residual question I ask myself in deliberating what to do: not ethics, not wisdom, not anything else. (Gibbard 2003: 10-11)

As these remarks suggest, the issue here is closely related to G. E. Moore’s famous open-question argument (Moore 1903, §13). But it is not – as Moore thought – an issue about what normative properties must be like. It is an issue about what normative judgments must be like, in order to answer the kinds of questions that we need them to answer. The basic idea is that, if we think of

---

7 See Chapter 1, Section 5 above.

8 Expressivists have often leveled this criticism against Moore. See especially (Gibbard 2003, Ch. 1), and cf. (Stevenson 1942/1963), (Hare 1952: 83ff.), (Ayer 1984: 21-3), and (Blackburn 1998: 86ff.).
normative judgments in a certain way – if we think of them in the way that the theoretical cognitivist thinks of them – they will always leave us with further practical questions that they were supposed to answer.

It is worth pausing here to note the striking similarity between the worry expressed in these passages and the worry that Korsgaard has famously pressed against realist accounts of normative judgment, in passages like this:

If it is just a fact that a certain action would be good, a fact that you might or might not apply in deliberation, then it seems to be an open question whether you should apply it. The model of applied knowledge does not correctly capture the relation between the normative standards to which action is subject and the deliberative process. (Korsgaard 2003/2008: 317)

As I see it, the problem Korsgaard is raising for realism here is at bottom the same as the problem that Gibbard and Blackburn are raising for descriptivism in the passages quoted above. The problem, in a word, is that if normative judgments really are what the realist says they are – if they really are representations of normative facts, in some sense of ‘represent’ which leaves us needing to take the further step of applying those representations in action once we have formed them – then, once we have made our normative judgments (once we have represented the normative fact that a certain act would be good, say), we will still face the further, practical question of whether to apply that representation in our deliberations about what to do.9 But that leaves our normative

---

9 Korsgaard may also have in mind a further worry here, one that pertains not just to the nature of normative judgment (i.e., whether it’s practical or not), but also to the content of the normative truths themselves. If I understand her correctly, she thinks that the reasoning being described here has implications not just for our views about what normative judgments fundamentally are, but also for how we ought to engage in normative thinking: once we understand normative judgments as fundamentally practical, we’ll see that the standards for making such judgments must be derivable from facts about what’s constitutive of agency. I believe that Hare thought something very similar, although for him the relevant standards were constitutive of universalized preference (which he took to be built into the logic of moral concepts), rather than being constitutive of agency as such. (On Hare’s view, one can settle the question of what to do, and thereby perform an action, without thereby settling the question of what one ought to do, since one can simply form preferences without trying to universalize them. This is what creates space for the amoralist, whom Hare wrestles with at length in Ch. 10 of Moral Thinking.)
judgments looking too detached from the practical activity we are engaged in when we’re deliberating and making decisions. The thoughts that we have when we engage in normative thinking – when we try to figure out, for example, what it would be good to do – are not idle representations which we then choose to apply (or not) once we have shifted gears and begun to engage in practical thinking. A normative judgment is a part of practical thinking, not something external to practical thinking which exerts its influence from without.

Now, Korsgaard’s language in the passage quoted above suggests that the problem for realism is that it is unable to explain a certain normative fact, namely, why we should act in accordance with normative facts. But that way of putting the point can be misleading. Putting it in that way makes it seem like the problem admits of a trivial response: we should act in accordance with normative facts because those facts are, precisely, facts about what we should do. This is how David Enoch responds to the worry, for example, when discussing concerns about practicality on behalf of the theoretical cognitivist. He writes:

*Of course* the normative truths bear on what we have (normative) reason to do – after all, many of them just are truths about what we have reason to do. It is utterly misleading to suggest that these truths out there in Plato’s heaven cannot have any bearing on what we down here should do. For on Robust Realism these truths out there in Plato’s heaven just are truths about what we down here should do. (Enoch 2011: 239)

I believe that Enoch has missed the point here. Something goes missing if we understand the issue – as Enoch does in the passage just quoted – in terms of a question about how normative facts bear on what we ought to do. Enoch himself goes on to suggest that, because this question admits of such a trivial answer, the real issue about practicality must instead be “based on the thought that

---

10 Dreier (2015b: 177) makes the same point about a different passage from “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason.”

11 Enoch of course does not use the term ‘theoretical cognitivist’. He is speaking on behalf of the view that he calls ‘robust realism’, which is a version of theoretical cognitivism. For similar responses to Korsgaard’s worry, see (FitzPatrick 2005: 686), (Parfit 2011: 420), and (Scanlon 2014: 10).
the normative truths must be *motivationally* relevant” (ibid.). That takes us back into the domain of the traditional motivation problem, which as we’ve seen also fails to capture the real issue. The issue about practicality arises somewhere in between the two.

It is very difficult to state the issue here without using normative language. I think there is an interesting reason for that. It is because the issue can only be properly appreciated from the first-person deliberative perspective, and because we do not have any other terms with which to state the issues that arise from within that perspective. As the practical cognitivist sees things, that is precisely what normative language is *for*: it allows us to formulate and discuss the practical questions that arise as we are making up our minds about what to do.\(^\text{12}\) The problem is that this is precisely one of the things that separates the practical cognitivist from her opponents – i.e., from the very people whose view she wants to challenge by pressing the issue about practicality. This makes it difficult to find a clear and direct way of stating the challenge. If we try to describe it from the outside, in terms of a question about how normative judgments motivate us, we end up losing sight of the real issue. But if we try to express it straightforwardly in normative terms – e.g., in the form of a question about why we should do what the normative truths “out there in Plato’s heaven” tell us to do – we open ourselves up to the trivializing response, and the challenge loses much of its force.

I believe that the best we can do here is to bring the character and significance of the practicality issue into view by approaching it from within the first-person deliberative perspective. That is what I will try to do here. I’ll start by walking through a line of reasoning that unfolds

\(^{12}\) On this point, see especially (Korsgaard 2003). Compare Gibbard’s (2003: 6) claim that expressivism gives us “a language that we need … if we are to state all the issues that arise on the way to decision,” and Blackburn’s (1998: 49) claim that we have ethical language “because we need to discuss how to behave and whom to admire, and to pass on the solutions to such problems that we find.”
largely from within that perspective, with the aim of highlighting certain problems that arise if we understand our normative judgments in the way that theoretical cognitivism recommends. I’ll then take a step back and say what I think we can learn from that line of reasoning, and why I think it motivates a practical-cognitivist treatment of normative judgment.

3.4 Residual questions

Suppose I am trying to figure out what to do. I promised to help my friend move today, say, but it’s raining outside and I don’t want to get wet. I tell you that I’m considering canceling, because I don’t want to get wet, and you tell me that this is no reason to renege on my promise. I think about it for a while and eventually come to agree with you. I come to believe that the fact that I don’t want to get wet is not a reason to break my promise, and I conclude that I ought to help my friend.

Here is a rough description of how the theoretical cognitivist understands what’s going on in this sort of case. I first find myself in a situation of practical uncertainty: I promised to help my friend, and I was planning to do so, but as the time for action draws near I am tempted to cancel. I then find myself facing certain normative questions: is the fact that I don’t want to get wet a reason to cancel? Should I make up an excuse so that I can stay at home? Or should I keep my promise and help my friend move? These are representational questions about how things are in normative reality, and in order to answer them correctly, I need to form some accurate representations of what normative reality is like. Since I am unsure about what this particular region of normative reality is like, I come to you and ask for help. You have your own views about this, and you share them with me by telling me that the fact that I don’t want to get wet is not a reason to cancel, and that I
ought to help my friend. Eventually, I come to agree with you that this is how things are, and I form the corresponding representations.\textsuperscript{13}

By contrast, here is how the practical cognitivist understands what’s going on in this sort of case. Once again, I begin in a situation of practical uncertainty: I promised to help my friend, and I was planning to do so, but as the time for action draws near I am tempted to cancel. That temptation is itself the beginning of a kind of practical thinking. My desire not to get wet shows up in my consciousness in a certain way, and it says, as it were, “Hey, don’t help your friend. You’ll get wet if you do. Just cancel.” My experience of this desire, and more generally my experience of the practical uncertainty that I am facing in this case, can be understood “from the inside” in terms of the need to answer certain practical questions – e.g., the question of \textit{what to do} in the situation I am now in, or the question of \textit{whether to weigh} the fact that I don’t want to get wet in favor of canceling.\textsuperscript{14} I answer such questions by making a kind of practical commitment – one that settles where I stand with respect to the relevant practical question (e.g., a commitment to keeping promises in situations like this one). Since I am unsure about which practical commitments to make here, I come to you for help. I use normative language to express the practical questions I am facing “internally” in an external and impersonal way, e.g., by asking whether the fact that I don’t want to get wet is a reason to cancel, or whether I ought to keep my promise and help my

\textsuperscript{13} This is obviously a rough sketch, but it is intended to capture the sort of picture philosophers have in mind when they say things like this: “moral judgments \textit{have} as their purpose the accurate representation of moral reality” (Shafer-Landau 2003: 155); “moral claims \textit{purport} to represent moral reality … in a fairly robust sense” (Cuneo 2007: 27); “normative judgments \textit{express} fully representational beliefs about response-independent pieces of reality” (Enoch 2011: 250); and so on. Such claims are quite common among philosophers who think of themselves as cognitivists, and a commitment to the picture they express is central to the view I’m calling ‘theoretical cognitivism’. Let me emphasize, though, that for my purposes here I can remain largely non-committal on how exactly such claims are to be understood. What matters is just that they are intended to go beyond the purely deflationary claim that normative judgments are true if and only if their contents hold (which is something that philosophers who reject these representationalist ideas can perfectly well accept).

\textsuperscript{14} This general way of thinking about desire is helpfully developed in Tamar Schapiro’s work on the nature of inclination (Schapiro 2009, 2012, 2014).
friend. You have your own views about what to do in a situation like mine, and you share them with me by telling me that the fact that I don’t want to get wet is not a reason to cancel, and that I ought to help my friend. When you say these things, you are expressing a kind of practical commitment (very roughly, a commitment to keeping promises in situations like this one). Eventually, I come to agree with you about what to do in this sort of situation, and I form the corresponding practical commitments.15

Those are obviously very rough sketches. There is much more to be said on both sides. For present purposes, though, what matters is just the basic contrast between these two views. For the theoretical cognitivist, what begins as a practical problem eventually gives rise to questions about how things are in normative reality – questions that you and I address by forming and expressing our own representations of that reality. For the practical cognitivist, what begins as a practical problem remains a practical problem, and the questions it gives rise to are “practical all the way down.”16 They are questions about how to weigh certain sorts of considerations, what to do in certain sorts of situations, and so on. We can understand these questions without having to think of ourselves as trying to form robust representations of normative reality. When you and I discuss such questions, we are trying to figure out what to do in a situation like mine, and this can be understood in terms of the formation and expression of practical commitments – or so says the practical cognitivist.

15 One might think that our shared views about what to do in this case could not be understood in terms of practical commitments, because such commitments would have to be essentially first-personal (e.g., your commitment must be about what you are to do, whereas mine must be about what I am to do). I disagree. I will take up the issue more fully in Chapter 5, but the basic thought is that these commitments are best understood in general terms, as commitments about what to do in a certain sort of situation, and that one cannot coherently make such a commitment while thinking that it has no implications at all for what anyone else is to do. (At the very least, one must think that the commitment has some bearing on what another agent who is exactly like oneself in all relevant respects is to do.)

16 For this phrase, see (Korsgaard 1996b: 356).
With that basic contrast in view, let me now try to illustrate the practicality problem for theoretical cognitivism. Return to the scenario described above. I promised to help my friend move, and I was planning to do so, but now I’m considering canceling because I don’t want to get wet. I discuss the matter with you, and eventually I come to agree with you that the fact that I don’t want to get wet is not a reason to cancel, and that I ought to help my friend.

According to the theoretical cognitivist, the normative judgments that I make in this sort of case are, at bottom, attempts to get my mind to reflect some portion of normative reality. So, for example, when I judge that I ought to help my friend, what I have done is to form a certain kind of mental state – one that purports to reflect how things are in normative reality. To come to be in this sort of mental state is not yet to engage in any kind of practical activity: I can form a mental state that purports to reflect how things are in normative reality without making any sort of choice or practical commitment. When I judge that I ought to help my friend, then, I have not yet practically settled on any particular course of action in the way that I do when I choose or resolve to help my friend (or, more generally, in the way that I do when I make a practical commitment).

This much I take to be uncontroversial. The basic separation between representational belief and practical activity is widely endorsed by philosophers who self-describe as ‘cognitivists’, and whom I think of as theoretical cognitivists. Some of the clearest examples of this can be seen in the widespread resistance to Gibbard’s (2003) suggestion that “thinking what I ought to do is thinking what to do” (which I take to be a pithy statement of the practical cognitivist’s central thesis). Much of this resistance stems from the basic thought that forming normative representations is one thing, and engaging in practical activity (or “planning,” in Gibbard’s language) is something else. John Broome nicely summarizes this thought as follows:

Gibbard says that thinking what you ought to do is thinking what to do. But it is not. … At the same time as you answer the question “What ought I to do?” with “Start writing that
"lecture," you might answer the question “What shall I do?” with “Read the newspaper.” ... This means you are akratic. We have to recognize that akrasia is possible. It follows that thinking what you ought to do is not thinking what to do. (Broome 2008: 106)

Broome here points to an important challenge facing the practical cognitivist – namely, how to make sense of cases where our normative thinking and our practical commitments seem to come apart – which I will try to address in Chapter 4. What I want to do here, though, is just to extract a consequence from Broome’s way of thinking about normative judgment, which I take to be shared by anyone who thinks of normative judgment as fundamentally representational rather than practical.

The consequence is implicit in what Broome says: if making a normative judgment is not yet to make any kind of practical commitment, then, once I have figured out what I ought to do, I will still face the further practical question of what to do. Return to the example above. I have judged that I ought to help my friend, and to make that judgment is not yet to form any kind of practical commitment – or so says the theoretical cognitivist. It follows that, from my perspective as a deliberator, there is still a further question that I’ve yet to answer – namely, the question of what to do, the question that I answer precisely by making a practical commitment.

Questions of what to do – e.g., whether to help my friend, whether to cancel, whether to weigh the fact that I don’t want to get wet in favor of canceling, and so on – are genuine questions that we can and must ask as beings who have to make up our minds about what to do. But they are not representational questions about what some portion of reality is like. They call not for

For similar remarks, see (Hawthorne 2002: 171), (Scanlon 2003: 17), (Scanlon 2006: 722), (Bratman 2008: 95-6), and (Parfit 2011: 386).

To anticipate, the basic idea to be defended in Chapter 4 is that akrasia occurs when we are conflicted or disunified in some way. It’s not that we have two different views about two wholly distinct questions (as Broome here suggests); rather, we have conflicting views about a single question – the question of what to do.
representations, but for practical commitments. Such questions are, as we might say, *irreducibly practical:* they remain “open” for us as long as we remain practically undecided about some aspect of what to do, and they get “closed” only when we become actively oriented toward the world in a certain way (as for example when I decide to help my friend, or when I resolve not to give any deliberative weight to the fact that I don’t want to get wet).

You can best appreciate the distinctively practical nature of these questions by considering them from the inside, as a fellow deliberator. Imagine that you are in a situation of practical uncertainty like the one described above. You’ve promised to help your friend move, and you’re not sure whether to cancel or help. When you are in that state, you are undecided about various aspects of what to do. You don’t know what to make of the fact that you don’t want to get wet. You don’t know whether to help your friend or whether to stay at home. Now suppose that you ponder the matter for a bit and decide to help. Then you are no longer undecided about what to do: you’ve made up your mind about that. But if, instead of deciding to help, you had merely come to represent some portion of normative reality as being a certain way, then you would still face the practical question of what to do. You face that question for as long as you remain undecided.\(^{19}\)

Since questions of what to do are irreducibly practical, they cannot be answered by anything that falls short of practical commitment. And so they cannot be answered by judgments that are fundamentally representational. If our normative judgments are just attempts to get our minds to stand in a certain “robust” representation relation to some existing bit of normative reality, then, they will always leave us with further practical questions. For any normative judgment we

---

\(^{19}\) “Remaining undecided” must be understood in a particular way, here. In Buridan’s-ass cases, there is a sense in which one is fully decided about what to do, even though one has not yet *picked* from among various ways of implementing one’s decision (e.g., one has decided to buy the Wheaties but has yet to pick a particular box). When I talk about being undecided, I have in mind the practical situation you are in before you have decided to buy the Wheaties, not the one you are in when you have made that decision but have yet to pick a particular box.
make, we will be able to formulate a residual practical question that cannot itself be answered by simply forming further normative representations. Thus, the judgment that I ought to help my friend will leave me with the further practical question of whether to help him, the judgment that my not wanting to get wet is not a reason to cancel will leave me with the further practical question of whether to weigh that fact in favor of canceling, and so on.

Now suppose we ask: how am I to answer these further questions? Presumably, one would think, by reflecting on the relevant features of my circumstances, and by considering things like this: whether the fact that I don’t want to get wet is a reason to cancel; whether it would be okay to let my friend down when he’s counting on me to help; whether, given everything that I know about my situation, I ought to help my friend or stay at home. But I have already done these things. I have already figured out whether my not wanting to get wet is a reason to cancel – it isn’t. More generally, I have already done all of the thinking that goes into figuring out what I ought to do, and I’ve concluded that I ought to help my friend. There are no more normative judgments for me to make here. I have done all of my normative thinking, and yet I have still not settled the basic questions that prompted all of that thinking in the first place: the question of whether to help my friend, or whether to cancel because I don’t want to get wet. I haven’t answered those questions because all I have is a collection of normative representations – representations that purport to reflect how things are in normative reality – and because I need something more than that in order to answer my practical questions.

Is there, then, some other kind of thinking that I’m supposed to engage in, in order to address these questions? What concepts would I use to engage in such thinking, and how would I formulate my thoughts if I wanted to express them to you in language? I can’t use normative
concepts like REASON or OUGHT, since we are assuming that those are purely representational concepts, and I have already done all of the thinking that those concepts allow me to do.

Suppose, then, that we introduce some other concepts to capture what is going on when I engage in this further kind of thinking. These concepts will function very much like the concepts REASON or OUGHT, with the exception that their use will be essentially tied to practical thinking in the way that the practical cognitivist wanted to tie normative concepts to such thinking. Suppose we decide to mark this with a subscripted ‘p’. When I answer the question of what to do by settling on helping my friend, we can say that I judge that I ought_p to help my friend. If I want to seek your help in thinking through my situation, I can describe my situation to you and ask what I ought_p to do. If I want to get more specific, I can ask whether the fact that I don’t want to get wet is a reason_p to break my promise. And so on. Then you and I would be engaging in practical thinking, together. My questions would be direct expressions of my practical uncertainty about what to do, and your answers would express your own thinking about how to resolve that uncertainty. The thoughts that we would be entertaining as we engaged in this conversation would be such that if I accepted them – if I came to agree with you, for instance, that the fact that I don’t want to get wet is not a reason_p to break my promise, and that I ought_p to help my friend – I would thereby resolve my practical uncertainty.

The practical cognitivist’s thought is that these subscripts are an excrescence. They are supposed to mark out that the newly introduced concepts are practical. But in the present context that sounds like some kind of joke. What was the point of the original concepts – OUGHT and REASON, as they figure in judgments about what we ought to do and what we have reason to do –

---

20 Note that this is importantly different from asking what you think I ought_p to do, which is a question about your mental state and not a direct expression of my own practical uncertainty. See the discussion of practical content in Chapter 2, Section 2 above.
if not to figure in practical thinking in just the way that is indicated by these subscripted ‘p’s? Do we really need to introduce new concepts here? And if we do introduce such concepts, how should we conceive their relation to the old ones? How, for example, does the judgment that I ought to help my friend bear on the judgment that I ought<sub>p</sub> to help my friend? Should I take that judgment into account when thinking about what I ought<sub>p</sub> to do? Or perhaps I ought to ask (or ought<sub>p</sub> to ask?), should I take that judgment into account when thinking about what I ought<sub>p</sub> to do?

These questions seem ridiculous, and that’s precisely the point. There are no such questions, because there are not really two sets of concepts here. In ordinary cases, no one who deploys the concept OUGHT or REASON, in the context of thinking about what she ought to do or what she has reason to do, takes herself to be engaging in some kind of cognitive exercise that will leave open all practical questions of what to do. If someone comes to you and asks for your advice (“What should I do here?”), she is asking for your help in answering the basic practical question that we all face as deliberating agents – the question that we answer by settling on a particular course of action. She is trying to make up her mind about what to do, not trying to engage in some other, wholly distinct kind of cognitive activity whose bearing on this question must then await the results of still further reflection. And if there were two kinds of thinking here, it would be hard to see what the point of the non-practical kind of thinking might be. Why not just engage directly in practical thinking?

Let me now take a step back and say what I think the root of the problem is here. At bottom, the problem is that a certain way of thinking about normative judgment fails to establish the right kind of connection between an agent’s normative judgments and her “subsequent practical activity.” The basic thought is that we cannot explain what’s distinctive about normative thinking.

---

21 I use scare quotes here because one of the upshots of the present discussion is precisely that it’s a mistake to conceive of practical activity as something wholly separate from and “subsequent to” normative thinking. Of course there are
by straightforwardly applying a representational model of cognition that seems to work well in other cases, and then simply adding that in the normative case what we are representing is “a special aspect of the world, its normative aspect” (Raz 1999: 113). That sort of view inevitably yields a distorted picture of the way that normative judgments bear on deliberation and action.

I have attempted to illustrate this problem from the inside, by inviting you, first, to occupy the perspective of someone who is deliberating about what to do, and then to suppose that your normative judgments really are attempts to get your mind to reflect some portion of normative reality. And I have suggested that, when you do this, you will be able to see that your normative judgments would not bear the right kind of relation to your practical activity, if this view about normative judgments were true. You come to see this by seeing that your normative judgments would always leave you with residual practical questions – questions that could not be answered, in turn, by forming further normative representations. In other words, you come to see that if this is what it is to engage in normative thinking, you are going to need to engage in some other kind of thinking in order to answer the basic practical questions you face when you are trying to figure out what to do – questions that you are now forced to formulate in terms of what you ought, or what you have reason, to do. But once we spell out what this other kind of thinking would look like, e.g., by introducing the concepts with subscripted ‘p’s, it starts to seem very much like the sort of thing we would have been inclined to call ‘normative thinking’ all along. It looks like the cases where the two come apart (e.g., weakness of will, paralysis, sudden death), but these are deviations from the normal case. The point here is similar to one that has been defended, in a slightly different context, by philosophers who endorse the Aristotelian view that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action. See for example (Tenenbaum 2007), (Korsgaard 2009: 124-5), and (Dancy 2014).

22 The full quotation from Raz reads: “If normative beliefs alone can lead people to action, etc., that is not because they are beliefs of a special kind (consisting in part of volitional states or dispositions) but because they are beliefs about a special aspect of the world, its normative aspect” (Raz 1999: 113). This nicely summarizes the thought that I mean to be challenging here.
sort of thing ordinary people are doing when they think about what they ought to do, or about what they have reason to do.

It is only when we approach this problem third-personally that it looks as though the only question about practicality concerns a “reliable connection” between normative judgment and motivation. And when we approach the problem in that way, it looks as though we can easily solve it without having to think of normative judgments themselves as involving any kind of practical commitment. To recall some of the suggestions above, we can just say that most people have very strong desires to do what they ought to do, or that normative judgments tend to cause people to make certain choices or form certain intentions. But these solutions do not address the underlying worry here, which is not really about a reliable causal connection at all. The underlying worry is about how we must understand normative judgments in order for them to be capable of playing the role that we need them to play – and the role that they obviously do play – in practical deliberation. And understanding them as representations that reliably motivate us in certain ways does not help to address that worry.

To see this, suppose we try to apply this sort of response from the inside. When I form a robust representation of normative reality, I have not yet begun to engage in any kind of practical activity. Suppose I know this. Then I know that, when I judge that I ought to help my friend, I will still face the practical question of whether to help him. Now suppose you inform me that, if I judge that I ought to help my friend, that will likely cause me to help him. Well, so what? That’s just a bit of further information that I now have to take into consideration when thinking about whether to help. I now know the following facts: I promised to help my friend; he’s counting on me; I’d be letting him down if I canceled; and so on. Moreover, I know that, if I judge that I ought to help my friend, that judgment will likely cause me to help him. Well, suppose I make that normative
judgment. Now I know that I’m in a mental state that is likely to cause me to help. Is that something to endorse, or is it something to resist? To answer that, I need to have already answered the basic practical question that I was trying to answer in the first place – the question of whether to help my friend. So positing a reliable causal connection does not help here.

In order to address the underlying worry about practicality, the theoretical cognitivist needs to claim that our normative judgments do not leave us with further practical questions. But it is difficult to see how she can do that without giving up on the idea that normative judgments are fundamentally attempts to represent how things are in normative reality. To form such a representation is not yet to make any kind of choice or practical commitment. When I form a robust representation of the normative fact that I ought to help my friend, I have not yet settled on helping him in the way that I do when I choose or resolve to help – so says the theoretical cognitivist. Can’t I then ask whether to help my friend, once I have made my normative judgment? And can’t I answer that question either by deciding to help, or by deciding to do something else? Why should these practical questions be answered automatically once I have formed some representations of normative reality?

The practical cognitivist has a straightforward answer here: there are no remaining practical questions once we have made our normative judgments, because normative judgments just are answers to practical questions. Her motivating thought is precisely that we need to explain normative judgment in a way that allows us to make sense of this claim. That is why she insists that such judgments must be understood as expressions of a kind of practical commitment. But the theoretical cognitivist cannot say this, on pain of giving up her theoretical cognitivism. And it is difficult to see what else she could say here. Positing a reliable causal connection between normative judgment and practical commitment doesn’t help, as we have just seen. But if she tries
to incorporate the practical commitment into the normative judgment itself, then she has already endorsed practical cognitivism.

### 3.5 A hybrid response?

At this point, the theoretical cognitivist might want to insist on a kind of hybrid view, according to which normative judgments are both representational and practical. The idea here would be to hold on to the idea that normative judgments are fundamentally attempts to get our minds to reflect normative reality, just as theoretical cognitivists have always maintained, but to insist they are also practical in whatever sense is required to avoid the problems I have been raising.

I have to admit that I find this proposal difficult to understand. It seems to me that normative judgments can be either representational or practical, but not both. But I suspect that others will find this reply unsatisfying, and so I want to make three further points in response. Although I do not have a knock-down argument against this hybrid proposal, my hope is that these points will collectively help to illustrate why I find the proposal puzzling, and to motivate my rejection of it.

The first point that I want to make here is just that the hybrid proposal does not seem to be in the spirit of theoretical cognitivism. Even if one could (in principle) concede the practical cognitivist’s point about the nature of normative thinking while still insisting that we keep an element of robust representation in the picture, this seems out of keeping with the general idea that normative beliefs are just like ordinary representations except that the things they represent are distinctively normative. The hybrid proposal in effect grants that the idea of a representation of normative reality does not capture what’s distinctive about normative judgment, but then insists on holding onto that idea anyway. This strikes me as odd and unmotivated.
The second point is that the hybrid view will not be responsive to the worry about residual questions if the “cognitive” part of normative judgment is still being understood in representational terms, with an element of practical commitment now being tacked on as something that simply comes along for the ride, so to speak, whenever we form a normative representation. The reasoning above was supposed to show that normative thinking itself must be practical, and hence that it can’t be understood in straightforwardly representational terms. But if the appeal to robust representation is not explaining the cognitive nature of normative thinking, what work is it doing? If we can make sense of normative thinking in practical terms, why add on this extra layer of robust representation?

The third point is that the hybrid proposal gives rise to difficult questions that I do not see how to answer – questions that simply do not arise if we are (pure) practical cognitivists. The lesson about residual questions, again, was that normative judgments must be the sorts of things that answer practical questions. The proponent of the hybrid view in effect takes this lesson to heart but then goes on to insist that normative judgments actually answer two questions: how things are in normative reality, and what to do. But why is it that, when I form a robust representation of how things are in some portion of normative reality, I (must?) thereby also form a practical commitment about what to do? Moreover, given that I can just as easily ask (simply) what to do, what point is there to engaging in this kind of hybrid thinking? Any considerations that might go into my making of a hybrid judgment could be taken into account by simply engaging directly in practical thinking. For example, if the judgment is that I ought to be kind, I could just think directly about what it is like to be kind, what effects this would have, and so on, and ask whether to be like that. What role is played by the supposed representation of normative reality, here? Again, why not just think directly about what to do and why?
Notice that the (pure) practical cognitivist does not face similar questions, since she in effect identifies normative questions with practical questions. Her view is that normative questions just are practical questions – they are questions of what to do and why. When we try to answer a normative question, we are not trying to do two things at once: form a representation of normative reality, and make a practical commitment. To make a practical commitment just is to make a kind of normative judgment, according to this view. So there is no question about how the normative bit and the practical bit relate to one another; we cannot “cleave off” the practical from the normative in the way that we can on the hybrid proposal.

In general, then, my thought here is that once we have conceded all of this – i.e., once we have agreed that normative judgment must involve an element of practical commitment, and once we have granted that the “cognitive” part of normative judgment must itself be practical – there seems no good reason to insist on keeping an element of robust representation in the picture. The practical commitments can do all the necessary work on their own, and the appeal to robust representations comes out looking superfluous.

That is a large claim, of course, and a full defense of it would require me to consider all the reasons why one might want to be a robust representationalist about normative judgment and to rebut them one by one. I do not want to engage in that project here. I will try, in later chapters, to address what I take to be the main reasons why many philosophers are led to endorse representational views – one stemming from concerns about the possibility of akrasia, and one stemming from concerns about correctness and objectivity (and more generally from concerns about “taking ethics seriously”). But I won’t try to close off all possible escape routes for the

---

23 Another reason why many philosophers are led to endorse representational views has to do with the so-called “Frege-Geach problem,” and with the desire to fit normative judgments into the mold of standard ways of theorizing about content (these concerns are most fully developed in (Schroeder 2008), but see also (Schroeder 2015)). I find these concerns un compelling but will not try to address them here. On the Frege-Geach issue, I am largely in agreement
representationalist; I am happy enough if she grants me my practical commitments, and I leave it to others to say why we might need something more than that.

3.6 Conclusion

The issue about practicality, I have suggested, is not best understood in terms of a problem about how normative judgments motivate us. The issue is about how we have to conceive of normative judgments in order to for them to be capable of playing the role that they obviously do play in practical reasoning. Such judgments are capable of closing off practical deliberation. That is not something that they just happen to do, blindly as it were. There is an essentially intelligible relationship between answering what we might think of as the fundamental normative question, or the question of what I ought to do, and closing off deliberation in the way that one does when one settles on a particular course of action as the thing to do. From the inside, there is no gap here. Our view of normative judgment should thus not be one that is such that, if we accepted it, there would be a gap here. That is the fundamental problem with views that make normative thinking fundamentally representational rather than practical. Such views cannot properly capture the essentially intelligible relationship between normative judgment and practical activity.

I have attempted to illustrate this point from the inside, by inviting you, first, to occupy the perspective of someone who is deliberating about what to do, and then to suppose that your normative judgments are, in fact, fundamentally representational in the way that the opponent of practical cognitivism insists. And I have tried to illustrate some of the puzzles you will eventually face when you do this. Those puzzles – which began with a sense that something absurd was going

with the points made in (Gibbard 2012, Appendix 2) and further developed by (Baker and Woods 2015). As for the concerns about deviating from standard ways of theorizing about content, my reply is that the hybrid proposal already has to deviate from such theories in granting that the cognitive part of normative thinking is itself practical.
on, and culminated in the suggestion that robust normative representations would be superfluous – were ways of getting you to see that your normative judgments would not have the right kind of relation to your practical activity if they were purely representational.

Let me conclude this section with a caveat. I do not doubt that many of us use the word ‘ought’ in a way that has no clear bearing on our practical activities, or that we have thoughts and form beliefs that we would express by using the word in that way. But I believe that when this happens the word has lost (most of) its meaning and significance for us. And I think this is something we should work to prevent. To the extent that our normative words lose their essential connection to practical activity, we lose ways of engaging in intelligent, reflective practical engagement with the world. And to the extent that we understand normative thinking as something wholly separate from practical activity, it becomes difficult to see why we should care so much about it, or why we should be interested in it in the way metaethicists normally are.

---

24 Often in such cases the word has come to mean something like “the sort of thing those moralists tell us to do.” But there are other, more interesting cases as well. Sometimes we are genuinely conflicted: part of us thinks that we ought to do something, but we can’t pull ourselves together enough to do it. In such cases we are incapable of fully endorsing the relevant normative thought. More on this in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4
Agency and Akrasia

4.1 The problem

I now want to return to a problem that I set aside in the previous chapter. The problem has to do with *akrasia*, or weakness of the will.\(^1\) Intuitively, it seems, we can and often do judge that we ought to do something but nevertheless decide to do something else. Sometimes people judge that they ought to give up smoking, for example, only to find themselves lighting up a cigarette moments later. Or, to use Broome’s example from above, you might judge that you ought to start writing a lecture but decide to read the morning paper instead. But according to the practical cognitivist, our normative judgments just are (expressions of) practical commitment. How then can we act in ways that conflict with our normative judgments? Doesn’t this sort of view rule out the very possibility of akrasia, and isn’t that a problem?

Note that there does not seem to be a corresponding problem here for the theoretical cognitivist.\(^2\) If normative judgments are just robust representations of how things are in normative reality, there is no puzzle about how an agent could act in ways that conflict with those judgments. An agent may know perfectly well what she ought to do – she may represent that normative fact – and simply decide to do something else. But because the practical cognitivist ties normative

---

1 Richard Holton (1999) urges a distinction between *akrasia*, which he takes to be a matter of acting against one’s normative judgment, and *weakness of will*, which he takes to be a matter of violating one’s practical commitments. It should be clear that the practical cognitivist can acknowledge no such distinction; for her, these two amount to the same thing. That seems to me as it should be: akrasia would not have been called ‘akrasia’ if it were not (what Holton calls) weakness of the will.

2 I want to emphasize the word ‘seem’, here. As I will suggest below (in Section 5), I do think there is a problem for the theoretical cognitivist here: akrasia ought to be puzzling, and it’s a problem that, according to the theoretical cognitivist, it isn’t.
judgments so closely to action, she seems to face a special challenge in explaining how it is possible for an agent’s actions to conflict with her views about what she ought to do.

The worry here can take on different forms, depending on how strongly we characterize the kind of akrasia that is thought to be at issue. Can we act against our normative judgments even in cases where we are not subject to any “maladies of the spirit” (e.g., fear, depression, anxiety, and so on)? Can we *choose* to act against our normative judgments? Can we do this while we are thinking clearly and while we are fully aware of all the relevant features of what we are doing? And so on. I want to start, though, with what I think of as the basic or “unadorned” case – the case in which we seem to act in ways that conflict with our normative judgments – without building any of these stronger descriptions into the statement of the problem at the outset. My reason for proceeding in this way is that I think we will have a clearer view of what the stronger descriptions amount to, and what sort of problem they might pose for the practical cognitivist, once we have seen how to handle the basic case.

### 4.2 Some preliminaries: how not to account for akrasia

It will be instructive to begin by seeing how the problem of akrasia arises in the context of earlier attempts to explain normative thinking as a kind of practical thinking, and to see why a certain style of response won’t do.

Consider R. M. Hare’s prescriptivist account of normative judgment. According to this view, to make a normative judgment is to accept a principle of conduct. Principles, Hare says, function like *commands*. And about commands he says this:

---

3 I take this phrase from Michael Stocker’s seminal paper on the topic (Stocker 1979).
We are said to be sincere in our assent [to a command] if and only if we do or resolve to do what the speaker has told us to do... It is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a [command], and at the same time not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do it. (Hare 1952: 20)

Similarly, Gibbard characterizes normative judgments as (expressions of) plan, and he says that plans are the sorts of things we consider, adopt, and revise in the course of “thinking what to do.”

And about thinking what to do he says this:

To think, for instance, that the thing now to do is to defy the bully who torments me is to plan to defy him. And planning right now to defy him right now, to do it at this very moment, amounts to setting out to do it. … I think that something is now the thing to do, then I do it. (Gibbard 2003: 153)

The problem, of course, is that both of these views – at least as they are characterized in these passages – entail that it is impossible to act in ways that conflict with our normative judgments. But surely it is possible to act in such ways – that is just what happens when we are akratic, or weak-willed. So these views can’t be right. As Broome pithily puts it in a passage I quoted above (§3.4): “We have to recognize that akrasia is possible. It follows that thinking what you ought to do is not thinking what to do” (Broome 2008: 106).

Actually, what follows is not what Broome says, but something slightly more complicated. What follows is that thinking what to do cannot be characterized in the way that Hare and Gibbard have wanted to characterize it. The problem arises here because Hare and Gibbard have characterized the relevant practical states (i.e., the ones that are said to be expressed by normative judgment) in a way that builds in a necessary connection to action. That makes even the weakest

---

4 Hare is speaking here of second-person commands addressed to us by another person, but he is using these remarks to illustrate the general idea of assenting to an imperative, which he then deploys to explain the prescriptivity of normative judgments. See (ibid., pp. 168-9) and (Hare 1981: 21).

5 Both authors suggest refinements elsewhere. I discuss some of these briefly below.

6 See also (Scanlon 2003: 17; 2006: 722), (Hawthorne 2002: 171), and (Bratman 2008: 95-6). For a useful discussion of these issues in the context of Hare’s view, see (Frankena 1988).
forms of akrasia impossible. If you’ve settled what to do, according to these views, then, when the time for action comes, you do it. This is something that simply falls out of the way these philosophers have characterized practical commitments (or principles and plans, as they call them), and it is the real source of the worry about akrasia. The solution is not to abandon the idea that normative judgments are (expressions of) practical commitment, but to characterize practical commitments in a way that loosens the connection to action.

There are some pitfalls that we must avoid when trying to develop a solution along these lines. It can be tempting at this point to fall back into a strictly “motivational” way of thinking about practical states, and to say something like this: the mistake that Hare and Gibbard made was to say that normative judgments express a kind of practical state that necessarily leads to action. But that’s absurd. There are many kinds of states that might move us to act, after all. Why not just say that normative beliefs (i.e., the mental states expressed by normative judgments) are one kind of motivational state among many, and acknowledge that they are not always the ones that lead to action? Akrasia occurs, we could then say, when some other kind of motivational state leads us to do something that we wouldn’t have done, had we been motivated by our normative beliefs.

There is clearly something right about this response. But it is not as simple or straightforward as it seems to execute it successfully. It is not enough to simply say that we are subject to competing sources of motivation and leave it at that.\footnote{Blackburn (1998) occasionally seems to be suggesting this kind of flat-footed response. See, for example, the remarks spanning pp. 65-6. Occasionally Blackburn does emphasize things that I think are important, though, such as the necessary presence of inner conflict in genuine cases of akrasia (ibid., 68).} The reason has to do with the point about practicality that I made in the previous chapter. If the practical cognitivist is going to draw support for her view from considerations about the practicality of normative judgment, she cannot understand practicality in terms of a reliable causal connection between normative judgment and
action. Practicality must instead be understood in terms of the role that normative judgments play in answering questions of what to do. It’s not just that normative judgments tend to reliably cause us to behave in certain ways; it’s that they are by their very nature such as to settle where we stand on practical matters of what to do – they are the sorts of things that close off practical questions. One lesson of that discussion was that normative beliefs must be a very particular kind of motivational state: one that makes them fit to serve as the agent’s answers to practical questions. And the point I want to emphasize here is that this is a lesson for practical cognitivists as well as theoretical cognitivists, for it rules out thinking of normative beliefs as “mere desires” just as much as it rules out thinking of them as “mere representations.” To adapt a point I made above (§2.2): the practical cognitivist may think of normative beliefs as motivational states (or desires, passions, etc.) in a broad sense, but she still needs to characterize them in a way that sets them apart from the kinds of motivational states (desires, passions, etc.) that don’t suffice on their own for settling where we stand on practical matters.

This means that it is not enough, when trying to account for akrasia, to simply say that normative attitudes are one kind of motivational state among many, and that akrasia occurs when we are led to act by some other kind of motivational state. Normative attitudes are one kind of motivational state among many, but they are a very specific kind of motivational state: the kind that is such as to settle where we stand on practical matters of what to do. This means that they are not “on a par,” practically speaking, with other kinds of motivational states. And once we say this, we have to think of the conflicting motivational states that are at work in cases of akrasia in a particular way. We have to think of them as things that, at least in these cases, undermine or interfere with the agent’s “active” states.
I think these remarks raise serious problems for Hare’s (1981: 51) suggestion that we can account for akrasia by appealing to “conflicting prescriptions,” as well as Gibbard’s (2012: 216) suggestion that we can do so by positing two different “planning systems.” I won’t consider these suggestions in detail here, since I want to focus on an alternative that I think is more promising, but the basic problem is that they both end up making normative judgments “external” to the practical activity of figuring out what to do in the way that practical cognitivists have always found troubling. Roughly: if the mental episodes that figure in “planning” are what settle where we stand on practical matters of what to do, and if we can engage in further planning even after we have made our normative judgments (because there are now “two kinds” of planning), then making normative judgments will no longer suffice for answering practical questions. Once we have made our normative judgments, we will then face the further question (from within the second planning system, as it were) of whether to do what they say. A parallel point could be made about Hare’s conflicting prescriptions.8

4.3 A more promising suggestion

A better suggestion is one that Gibbard makes elsewhere in passing. He suggests that akrasia might occur when we “shy away from accepting the imperative” – i.e., the imperative that’s contained in the normative judgment – because of “emotional pressures that undermine being guided by reasoning” (Gibbard 2012: 210). What makes this suggestion more promising is that the two motivational states or systems – reasoning and normative judgment, on the one hand, and “emotional pressures,” on the other – are not pictured as being on a par with one another. It is not just that there are two different motivational systems that lead the agent to act in different ways;

8 See (Frankena 1988: 783) for a version of this criticism.
rather, the one system is pictured as undermining the proper functioning of the other, at least in certain cases. That suggests a more sophisticated relation between the two systems, and a more nuanced picture of how they figure in the agent’s cognitive economy.

I think this is a step in the right direction. But I also think we are going to need a much richer conception of agency than what’s been given to us by Hare or Gibbard (or indeed by any other expressivist) if we are going to make it work. At the very least, we will need a view that can underwrite the talk of undermining and proper function. It is not at all clear from Gibbard’s picture, for example, why we should think of the relevant cases as involving any kind of undermining, as opposed to simply thinking of them as cases where one causal system within the agent (the emotional one, as it were) leads her to act in a way that she would not have acted if some other causal system (the normative one) had been operative. Nor is it clear why the mental states that figure in one of these causal systems should be thought to settle where the agent stands on practical matters of what to do, even in cases where the other causal system is the one that leads the agent to act.⁹

The resources for answering these questions – at least in the abstract – are already at hand. The key is to characterize practical commitments in a way that ties them to our capacity to engage in what I earlier called ‘strong reflective agency’. As I said above (§2.4), the kind of agency that is relevant here is the kind that is exhibited, paradigmatically, when we deliberately and wholeheartedly pursue a course of action out of reflective commitment – the kind that has, so to speak, “more of the agent in it” – and the kind that is lacking when (for instance) we behave from appetite in a way that we don’t fully endorse. I did not attempt to provide a full story about what such agency consists in, but such a story is not needed to appreciate the abstract point that I want.

⁹ Korsgaard (1999) makes similar points in her criticism of the “Combat Model” of the soul.
to register here. The point is this: if we explain normative judgments as expressions of practical commitment, and we explain practical commitments as mental states that characteristically issue from the proper exercise of our strong agential capacities, then we can make room for akrasia by acknowledging something that seems obvious in any case, which is that it is possible for these capacities to breakdown or malfunction in various ways. The details of how one understands such malfunctions will of course depend on how one understands reflective agency, but I will try in the next section to offer some remarks that will be available to a wide range of views about this.¹⁰

The mistake that Hare and Gibbard made was to say that normative judgments express a kind of state that is necessarily tied to action, such that if we don’t do what the judgment says we don’t count as making the judgment (or as being in the relevant underlying state). What they should have said is that normative judgments express a kind of state — what I am calling a ‘practical commitment’ — that leads to action when our capacities to engage in this strong kind of agency are functioning properly. Akrasia occurs, we can then say, when these capacities breakdown or malfunction in various ways, so that our behavior does not fully express where we stand on practical matters of what to do. That lets us hold on to the idea that an agent’s normative judgments settle where she stands on practical matters — so that we don’t end up making normative judgments “external” in the way that practical cognitivists have always found troubling — without committing us to a picture on which the agent’s normative judgments can always be straightforwardly read off of her behavior. (They can be read off of an agent’s reflectively endorsed, wholehearted, self-

¹⁰My discussion will be subject to the constraints introduced above, in Chapter 2. We cannot understand strong reflective agency in terms of a capacity to act in accordance with one’s robust representations of normative reality; nor can we understand it merely in terms of action that is caused by an agent’s desires or passions (at least, not without some further story about why the relevant desires or passions are such as to settle where the agent stands on matters of what to do). This leaves open a range of options (cf. §2.4), though, and the discussion that follows will aim to be largely neutral among them.
governed behavior, though, and that might be thought to raise further problems of the same kind – I’ll come back to this worry at the end of the chapter.)

4.4 Further details: practical awareness and the regulative role of practical commitments

The discussion so far has been concerned with what we ought to say about akrasia at a very abstract level. We ought to say that it is behavior that manifests a failure of our strong agential capacities to function properly, and that it comes about when our practical commitments are undermined by some other kind of motivational state. In this section I want to add a few observations to this abstract picture, and to show how the resulting account explains some central akrasia-related phenomena.

The first thing to notice is that normative judgment is going to be a matter of degree, on this view. Our normative judgments are (expressions of) practical commitment, and our practical commitments vary in their strength, their seriousness, their reflectiveness, and so on. Making and revising practical commitments is a messy business, and there is not always a clear fact of the matter about where we stand, or about what commitments we hold. And so it is, on this view, for our normative beliefs. That seems appropriate to me. Sometimes, I think, there simply is no clear fact of the matter about what normative beliefs a person has. There are various ways of sharpening things when we are theorizing, and focusing on the paradigm case can be illuminating, but we should bear in mind that we don’t find many paradigm cases in real life. What we typically find are approximations, things that we can identify and interpret in terms of how they relate to the paradigm case. I’ll come back to this point at the end of the chapter.

The next thing to note is that, in order to do their job, practical commitments need to play a kind of regulative role in the agent’s cognitive economy. They need to regulate the functioning
of other kinds of potentially disruptive desires, inclinations, and motives to which we are subject.\textsuperscript{11} When I reflectively, wholeheartedly (etc.) commit myself to telling you the truth about something, I come to be in a state whose job is, in part, to ensure that potentially disruptive inclinations toward dishonesty are kept in check. If I haven’t committed myself to managing my motivational life in the relevant ways – if I remain completely open to indulging whatever inclination might lead me to lie to you instead of telling you the truth – then I haven’t yet committed myself to telling you the truth.\textsuperscript{12} This is not to say that, when I make this kind of commitment, I come to be in a state that guarantees that I will tell you the truth. But it does mean that, if I don’t tell you the truth, and if I haven’t changed my mind (if I still think that this is what I ought to do), then there is a kind of malfunctioning going on. Some conflicting motivational state – fear, perhaps, or a desire to please, or whatever – has undermined my ability to carry out my practical commitments. It has undermined my ability to self-govern.

Here is a further important observation. There are lots of things that have to be working smoothly in order for our practical commitments to function properly. One thing that’s crucial here is a certain quality of awareness, where by ‘awareness’ I mean the way that an agent apprehends her circumstances, including what she is doing, at the time of action. This kind of awareness – we can call it ‘practical awareness’ or ‘operative awareness’ – is importantly different from the kind of awareness that one can be said to have simply in virtue of having detached, theoretical beliefs about one’s circumstances. Being aware of certain features of your situation in the way that matters

\footnote{\textsuperscript{11} Bratman makes a similar point about what he calls “self-governing policies”; see his “Autonomy and Hierarchy” (reprinted in (Bratman 2007)).}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{12} Of course, we don’t generally commit ourselves to doing something \textit{no matter what}. There is a difficult issue here about how to distinguish cases where I violate my commitment from cases where I change my mind in a way that is reasonable, so to speak, from the perspective of the commitment itself. For helpful discussion of these issues, see Korsgaard’s remarks about “particularistic willing” in her (2009).}
for deliberation and action – having those features of the situation present in your practical awareness in the right sort of way – is different from merely having beliefs about those features. Even when our beliefs are, so to speak, present in our awareness, we do not always “see” things in the way that our beliefs represent them as being. (Consider the familiar example of someone who believes that a certain bridge is safe but cannot help seeing it as dangerous.) Practical awareness also comes in degrees: features of our situation can be more or less salient to us, and in general the things that we believe or know can be more or less “alive” in our mental arena.

It seems clear that an agent needs to maintain a certain clarity and stability of awareness in order for her practical commitments to function effectively. And practical awareness is easily affected by certain kinds of desires, emotions, appetites, and inclinations. There are obvious examples of this, as when hunger orients your attention towards food in particular ways, but there are more subtle ones as well. Think about how hard it is to hold all of the good things about someone at the front of your awareness when you’re angry at her. Anger has a tendency to restrict your awareness in particular ways (it makes salient the badness of what she did, or the selfishness she displayed in doing it, etc.). I take it this is a familiar feature of human life, but it’s worth reminding ourselves just how often our awareness is affected in these ways. Not just by anger, but by pretty much everything: love, sadness, grief, joy, tiredness, restlessness, anticipation, excitement, boredom, pride, anxiety, and so on. All of these things have a tendency to shape and

---

13 I don’t mean to suggest that the effects of emotions, desires, and passions are always bad, or that they always constitute a kind of defect. Feeling calm and content can make it easier to stay focused on the things that matter to you, and that’s a good thing. Feeling passionate about what matters can also keep you from being led astray by temptation. Nor is it a defect to draw on these kinds of emotional or passionate states in reflective self-governance. These things are an essential part of our practical outlooks, and we can’t engage in reflective action without such outlooks. The point is just that these states can and often do have a profound effect on the character of our practical awareness, and that they need to be moderated in ways that allow us to act effectively.
direct our awareness in various ways, some of which are fairly obvious, but some of which can be quite difficult to detect.

Very often, I think, what happens in cases of akrasia is that the agent’s awareness is shaped in ways that make his normative judgments ineffective. He believes, for instance, that adultery is bad, and even (in a way) that what he is about to do is to commit adultery, but he fails to have alive in his consciousness all of the vivid details about what that means. It means betraying the trust of his spouse; it means implicating someone else in this, and compromising both relationships; it means lying, now and in the future; it means disregarding other people’s needs, interests, and expectations, and subordinating their concerns to a selfish inclination to gratify his own lust; and so on. The akratic does not “see” what he is doing in a way that incorporates all of these features – which are, we may suppose, the very features in virtue of which he judges adultery to be bad and worth avoiding. It is no surprise that, when a person mentally filters out the “thick” descriptions of the act which ground his normative judgment in this way, the latter will fail to issue in action. It fails to do so because there is a kind of mismatch between the features of the situation that underlie the agent’s normative judgment, and the ones that are salient in his consciousness at the time of action.\footnote{This is, I think, the sort of thing that Aristotle has in mind when he says that the akratic lacks knowledge of particulars when he acts (NE, VII.3).}

We can put the point here in one of two ways. We can say that when the agent just described commits adultery, he is not fully aware that \textit{that} is what he is doing. Or we can say that he does not fully believe that adultery is bad (which is to say, very roughly, that he is not fully committed to avoiding things that fall under the description ‘adultery’). Of course he may be aware of these things in a sense – he might be able to correctly classify his act in these terms, as a kind of rote
mental exercise – but he doesn’t have a full appreciation of what these things mean when he acts in the way that he does. It’s not that he loses all ability to apply words like ‘adultery’ or ‘wrong’ to what he is doing, but at the time of action these are mere words to him.\textsuperscript{15}

It is no surprise that akrasia tends to occur in cases where we are particularly susceptible to these kinds of mental shifts or distortions. The adulterer’s lust continually draws his attention away from the things that really matter to him; the smoker’s cravings continually focus her attention on the prospect of having another cigarette, and on the discomfort and irritation that result from not having one, and they pull her attention away from all of the things about smoking that make her think she ought to give it up; the procrastinator engrosses himself in some other activity and prevents himself from fully confronting the reality of his impending deadlines; and so on. These are familiar cases, and they all involve familiar processes that draw the agent’s mind toward particular features of her situation and away from others.\textsuperscript{16}

It is important, when thinking about the scope of this style of explanation, to appreciate just how difficult it is to have clearly in view all of the relevant aspects of one’s situation (where ‘situation’ here includes all the relevant features of what one is doing, or what one is about to do). Our practical awareness is constantly being shaped and re-shaped by momentary shifts and changes in the mind. Feeling vaguely agitated at how long the meeting is taking, our mind jumps

\textsuperscript{15} This is how I understand Aristotle’s claim that the akratic is like the drunk person who recites the verses of Empedocles without really understanding what he is saying (NE, VII.3).

\textsuperscript{16} Consider, by contrast, Donald Davidson’s (1970) famous case of the person who judges that she ought to stay in bed rather than getting up to brush her teeth, but then gets up to brush her teeth anyway. One reason why this case can seem especially puzzling is that it is difficult to imagine it in a way that exemplifies the familiar dynamics of an akratic mind. We imagine the agent having already gone through the calculations about whether she can get by with unbrushed teeth for just this one night and concluding that she can; and then we are puzzled about what might be going on when she “akratically” brushes her teeth despite judging that it would be better to stay in bed. But if we imagine her instead being especially grossed out about the prospect of going to sleep with unbrushed teeth – compulsively visualizing all the germs in her mouth, imagining the bad smell of her breath, and so on – then the case starts to seem less puzzling.
to all the things we have to do when we get home. Feeling bored by someone’s conversation at
dinner, we begin thinking about something we find interesting. Once again, this doesn’t mean that
we lose all awareness that we are (say) at a meeting, or that we completely lose sight of the person
whose conversation is boring us. Our minds can do many things at once. But a shift toward greater
awareness of one thing (how much we have to do when we get home) does tend to diminish our
awareness of the other (what’s going on at the meeting), and in the face of powerful temptation an
agent is often only dimly aware of the things she takes to be relevant or important in her practical
deliberations. It takes a lot of work to maintain practical awareness of the right things at the right
moments – work that goes well beyond exercising one’s ability to classify things in a detached,
“intellectual” manner – and this is especially so when we are faced with the prospect of doing
something terrifying, or thrilling, or even just something that we don’t want to do. The work of
agency is not just the work of making decisions and then gritting one’s teeth. It is just as often the
work of getting oneself to see the world in a way that is consistent with one’s values – in a way
that coheres with the policies one endorses in one’s reflections about what to do and how to live.

These remarks suggest a helpful way of thinking about how to overcome akrasia. Philosophers working on akrasia sometimes suggest that we can do this simply by strengthening
an abstract capacity for self-control, or by avoiding things like “ego-depletion.”¹⁷ That strikes me
as too generic to be helpful across the board. No doubt there are cases in which akrasia could be
avoided in this way, but it seems naïve to think that we can address the underlying problems here
either through sheer force of will or by simply avoiding stressful or mentally taxing situations.
There are other things we can do, though. We can spend more time reflecting on the reasons why
we make our normative judgments (e.g., the reasons why we think we shouldn’t lie, or cheat, or

¹⁷ See, e.g., (Holton 2003) and (Levy 2010).
steal), making them clear and vivid to ourselves. We can bring to mind the temporary or fleeting nature of certain appetites, their tendency to leave us feeling unfulfilled and wanting more, and we can train ourselves to see the objects of our appetites regularly through that more reflective lens. We can cultivate stability of awareness and attention, thereby keeping our normative judgments in force in the face of contrary temptations. And so on. In short, we can train ourselves to see the world from the perspective our more reflective outlooks. This doesn’t require that we do away with emotions, desires, passions, and so on, but just that we learn to see the problematic ones for what they are, and that we cultivate new ones to put in their place; eventually, the new ones take hold and the old ones start to fade away. This is a process of Aristotelian habituation, and it is a part of becoming ethically mature. Much of what goes on in this process I would bring under the heading of normative reflection, and I think that when it is done successfully, it leads one to have a deeper understanding of the values embodied in less stable, less reflectively substantiated practical commitments.

What happens, then, when an agent is akratic? The answer is: it depends on the case. Sometimes things happen in the way I have just described: the agent judges that she ought not to do such-and-such, but she is not fully aware of what she’s doing as “such-and-such” at the time of action. Sometimes the agent doesn’t really make the normative judgment in the first place – she’s kidding herself. She says she ought to be better about getting to work on time, or returning people’s calls, or standing up to bullies, or whatever; but in her heart of hearts she doesn’t really care.

18 It’s worth emphasizing that the kind of training I am envisioning here is not simply a matter of cultivating raw motivational juice that gets the agent to do what she thinks she ought to do. Sergio Tenenbaum (1999) helpfully compares the case of a gambler who looks at a picture of his family to keep himself away from the gambling table to the case of someone who takes a pill that creates an irresistible craving to do the right thing. The gambler in this case is not simply “garnering motivation,” Tenenbaum says, “but finding a clear and obvious way to present something that [he] abstractly and perhaps vaguely judges to be good” (ibid., 903). I think this is right, and I see the gambler’s family picture in this case as a kind of necessary prop that prompts his mind to do what it would do automatically if he were fully virtuous and fully capable of seeing the world through the lens of his reflectively endorsed outlook.
Sometimes the agent makes the judgment but then changes her mind at the crucial moment: faced with the prospect of standing up to this particular bully here and now, she decides that it’s not worth it after all. And sometimes – perhaps more often than not – she is genuinely conflicted. Part of her thinks she ought to do the thing and part of her doesn’t. In such cases there may be no clear fact of the matter about what normative judgments the agent holds: her mind is too fractured, or too fickle, to attribute to her any clear view on the matter. Some may find the messiness here disappointing, but I embrace it; we are engaged in a complex interpretive enterprise when we try to make sense of someone whose behavior conflicts with her own views about what she ought to do, and much will depend on the details of the case.

4.5 Defect and phenomenology

The general picture I’ve been sketching here helps to explain two important facts about akrasia: that it typically counts as a kind of defect or failure, and that it normally involves feelings of inner turmoil or conflict. Appreciating this point can help to bring out one respect in which practical cognitivism actually seems to fare better than theoretical cognitivism when it comes to accommodating akrasia. To paraphrase a point that Hare once made: akrasia is supposed to be problematic – it’s supposed to be puzzling. The fact that it would not be puzzling or problematic on the theoretical cognitivist’s view is a strike against that view.

According to the practical cognitivist, when we make a normative judgment, we are taking a stand on some question of what to do. We are making a practical commitment, and to do this is to come to be in a state whose job is, in part, to ensure that other kinds of motivational states are

---

19 In Hare’s words: “[I]f moral judgments were not prescriptive, there would be no problem about moral weakness; but there is a problem; therefore they are prescriptive” (Hare 1963: 68). I concur.
managed in appropriate ways. Whenever we have a case of akrasia, then, we have a case where there is a state of the agent (her practical commitment), whose function is to direct the functioning of some other state (her desire, say), such that (i) the practical commitment has a stronger claim to settle where the agent stands than the other state; (ii) if the practical commitment were functioning properly the other state would not lead to action in this case; and (iii) the other state nevertheless does lead to action in this case. This captures a recognizable sense in which there is a failure of agency, and in which the agent is divided against herself. Her practical commitments are undermined by the motivational states that they are supposed to be directing, and as a result her behavior does not fully reflect where she stands.20

This picture also nicely captures some of the phenomenology of akrasia. Cases of akrasia are cases where we slip up. They generally involve a feeling of inner turmoil or conflict, as well as a sense that we are being “overcome” by whatever it is that leads us to behave akratically. They are cases where we let our desires or appetites get the best of us. They are, to that extent, cases where we are not fully behind what we are doing, where our behavior does not fully express where we stand. All of this is well explained on the present account.

Now consider, by way of contrast, what the theoretical cognitivist must say about akrasia. It is action that conflicts with the agent’s representations of how things are in normative reality. Why should that be seen as a kind of defect, though? What’s wrong with acting in a way that

---

20 There is a question about how to understand the normative-sounding language here. What does it mean to say that practical commitments are “supposed to” govern other motivational states, or that they “have a greater claim” to settle where the agent stands? The short answer is that I am thinking of these as functional claims about the nature of the states in question. The idea is that practical commitments are by their very nature such as to settle where a reflective agent stands on matters of what to do. This raises further questions about whether the account I’m sketching can provide an explanation of normative judgments/concepts in wholly non-normative terms. I don’t think that it can, because I don’t think the claims about agency and practical commitments can be cashed out in wholly non-normative terms. But I also don’t think this is a problem, since the view still helps us to “place” normative concepts in the natural world by giving us an overall picture of normative judgment that helps us understand how such concepts could come to be used by creatures like us.
conflicts with one’s normative representations? And why should such actions normally be accompanied by any kind of inner turmoil or conflict? The theoretical cognitivist does not, I think, have good answers to these questions. She can of course insist that it is *irrational* to act in ways that conflict with one’s normative judgments, but that is bound to seem like mere stipulation.\textsuperscript{21} And she can of course say that the akratic agent fails to do what seems from her own point of view to be best, and hence that the agent will experience herself as failing to do what’s best.\textsuperscript{22} But that does not seem to me to capture the distinctive kind of failure and defect that are involved – and that are often felt – in cases of akrasia. Amelie Rorty captures this point nicely in the following passage:

\begin{quote}
[T]he pains of *akrasia* are more than those occasioned by the loss of the goods represented by the agent’s [normative judgment]. At least some of the discomfort of *akrasia* comes from the agent’s being mystified by what he has done, rather than from the actual outcome of the akratic course, which can sometimes be quite enjoyable or serendipitous. Akratic actions are often unsettling because their occurrence gives the agent a sense of vertigo about his qualifications as an agent; that is one reason why self-deception often rides on the back of *akrasia*, to steady the vertigo of a voluntary agent who seems unable to command himself. (Rorty 1980: 209)
\end{quote}

This seems to me exactly right. The pains of akrasia are, at least in part, the pains of *agential failure* – the pains associated with being “unable to command oneself,” as Rorty says. Again, the practical cognitivist has a nice explanation of this fact. Akrasia *is* agential failure, on this view; it is a failure of one’s capacity for self-government, and it is experienced as such.

### 4.6 Extreme akrasia, and some methodological remarks

\textsuperscript{21} The basic worry here is helpfully developed, albeit in a slightly different context, by (Fernandez 2015). See (Dreier 2015a, 2015b) for similar objections.

\textsuperscript{22} This would be a way of adapting T. M. Scanlon’s (2007) suggestion that the apparent normative force of structural irrationality derives from the way the agent experiences her own behavior as being in conflict with (what she thinks she has) most reason to do.
I said above that I wanted to start by considering what I take to be the basic or “unadorned” kind of akrasia. These kinds of cases – which are, I think, the ones that we generally find in real life – are typically marked by a kind of inner turmoil or conflict, and they are cases where the agent does not seem to be fully behind what she’s doing. The account I’ve been sketching can explain these kinds of cases.

The question is how far this gets us. I want to say that it gets us all the way, but I suspect not everyone will agree with that. In particular, I suspect some people will think that the view I’ve sketched can only account for the easy cases – the ones that fall into what Donald Davidson calls the “shadow-zones” of human thought and behavior (Davidson 1970: 29) – and that there are other, harder cases that won’t be susceptible to the same kind of treatment. Aren’t there, for example, cases where we are fully aware that we ought not to pursue some course of action, and where we nevertheless fully (wholeheartedly, reflectively, autonomously, etc.) resolve to pursue it anyway? In short, can’t our practical commitments come apart from our normative judgments, not just in cases that involve some kind of mental distortion or agential breakdown, but even in cases where we are thinking perfectly clearly and, so to speak, fully in charge? Call these cases of extreme akrasia.23

As someone who is inclined to think of normative judgments in the way described above, I find these cases difficult to imagine. Or rather, I find it hard to interpret the imagined agent as, say, fully judging that she ought not to do the thing that she wholeheartedly resolves to do. I want to say that in such cases the agent only believes that she ought not to do the thing in a kind of secondary or derivative way. She entertains the words, perhaps, and gives them a kind of mental

23 I have chosen to avoid speaking of ‘clear-eyed akrasia’ here, since that phrase is sometimes used to cover a broader range of phenomena than what I am interested in here.
nod, but she’s not really making the normative judgment. She may “have the belief” in a sense, but she can’t have the content of that belief in view if the practical orientation of her mind really is the way that it would need to be in order for her to be fully resolved in doing something else.

I find it helpful here to draw a (limited) comparison with certain kinds of aesthetic judgments. Think about what it is like to really appreciate, directly and for yourself, that something is beautiful. Your mind is attuned to the thing in a particular way, and your awareness has a kind of phenomenal and attentional richness. Suppose we explained the judgment “That’s beautiful” as, in the first instance, an expression of this kind of experience. To properly grasp the content of judgments about what’s beautiful, you have to be capable of having these kinds of experiences. That’s not to say that you can’t form beliefs about what’s beautiful in all sorts of secondary or derivative ways (e.g., through testimony, or memory, or inference, or simply by guessing). And it’s not to say that we can’t attribute to you the belief that something is beautiful unless you are, at the very moment of our attribution, attuned to the thing in the relevant way. But if someone only had secondary or derivative beliefs about beauty – if she never had the kind of experience that’s expressed by paradigm judgments about what’s beautiful – then she wouldn’t really grasp the contents of those beliefs. They would be (mostly) empty thoughts for her. She might be able to make the right kinds of moves with them – saying the right things, drawing the right inferences – but she would never have their contents in view when she does these things. Those contents need to be understood by reference to the paradigm case of making a judgment that something is beautiful, and you can’t make that kind of judgment unless your mind is attuned to the thing in the way that it is when you have the relevant kind of experience (e.g. when you are really appreciating  

---

24 This is probably too crude, and I don’t know whether this sort of view could be made to work for aesthetic judgments. But it is still helpful as a way of illustrating the point that I want to make about normative judgments.
for yourself the beauty of a painting). (At a minimum, for instance, you can’t judge that something is beautiful in this sense if you are not paying any attention to it. But you also can’t do this if you are experiencing the thing as, say, overwhelmingly annoying. There is no room in mental space for your mind to be doing both of these things at once.)

So it is, I want to say, with normative judgments. For you to have the content of those judgments fully in view just is for your mind to have a certain kind of practical orientation. It is for you to be practically oriented toward the thing in the way that you would express by saying, in full sincerity and with full conviction, “Yes, that’s the thing to do,” or “No, I shouldn’t do that.” This is not to say that we can’t form normative beliefs in all sorts of secondary or derivative ways, but these things need to be understood by reference to the paradigm case of making a normative judgment. And when you make a normative judgment in this sense – when you judge, say, that you really ought to quit smoking for good – there is no room left in mental space for you to resolve to do something else (e.g., smoke one more pack of cigarettes). If you fully resolve to smoke one more pack, then you have thereby lost sight of quitting smoking as the thing that you ought to do. (Instead, you now think that what you ought to do is to smoke one last pack and then quit.)

Is it a problem that this view cannot accommodate extreme akrasia? I don’t think that it is, for reasons that I’ll explain in a moment. First, though, I want to emphasize just how strongly the relevant cases have to be described in order for the question even to arise. The agent’s mind is supposed to be entirely clear, entirely unclouded; she is supposed to make the normative judgment in the fullest, sincerest sense, and to have it in full awareness throughout the duration of her action; she is supposed to be fully aware of all of the relevant features of the thing that she resolves to do, including the ways in which these things conflict with her normative judgment; and she is supposed to be fully behind her resolution, not practically conflicted at all. These are extremely strong
claims, and I see no reason to assume in advance that they mark out a genuine possibility that must be accommodated. It certainly can’t be a matter of “ordinary common sense” that they do. Commonsense thought about these matters simply doesn’t operate at this level of specificity.

Many philosophers seem to disagree with me about this. It is generally assumed in discussions of this topic that we have some clear, uncontroversial data that can serve as starting points, and that something like the possibility of extreme akrasia figures among them; so that, other things being equal, we ought to prefer a view that preserves this possibility. Thus, for example, Donald Davidson asks (rhetorically):

[D]oes every case of incontinence involve one of the shadow-zones where we want both to apply, and to withhold, some mental predicate? Does it never happen that I have an unclouded, unwavering judgement that my action is not for the best, all things considered, and yet where the action I do perform has no hint of compulsion or of the compulsive? (Davidson 1970: 28-9)

And he goes on to say that, although there is “no proving that such actions exist,” it seems to him “absolutely certain that they do” (ibid., 29).

Similarly, David Wiggins says that “[A]lmost anyone not under the influence of theory will say that, when a person is weak-willed, he intentionally chooses that which he knows or believes to be the worse course of action when he could choose the better course,” and he criticizes “philosophers who have felt a strong theoretical compulsion to rewrite the description, rather than allow the phenomenon of weakness of will to appear as an incontrovertible refutation of the theories … that they are committed to defend” (Wiggins 1979: 251). Anyone who “values his pet theory above the phenomenon, and wants to hold that weakness of will [as just described] is simply an illusion,” he says, “will need to command some formidable conceptual-cum-explanatory leverage in the philosophy of value and mind – and an Archimedean fulcrum of otherwise inexplicable facts of human conduct” (ibid., 251-2). And such a person, he goes on to say, would
have to be “a man of some different stuff from any ordinary philosopher, psychologist, decision theorist or economist” (ibid., 252).

The rhetoric seems to me a bit overblown, but I take it Wiggins is here giving expression to a natural worry about the line I’ve been pressing. The worry is that I am simply denying the phenomena, or that I am “ redescribing” them in a way that we would not would be inclined to describe them, were it not for an antecedent commitment some “pet theory.” This raises difficult questions about philosophical methodology that I won’t try to address here, but let me try to say something about why I think the complaint is misplaced in this particular case.

The problem, in a word, is that in this particular case we simply don’t have a clear conception of what the phenomena are that is wholly independent of our sense of how to think about the philosophical and interpretive issues that form the subject matter of our “pet theories.” Human thought and behavior do not come to us neatly carved and clearly tagged. We have to interpret them. We do not simply observe, independently, as it were, of any interpretive apparatus, that the akratic fully believes that he ought to refrain from some course of action at the very same moment as he fully resolves to pursue it – let alone that he does this in full awareness and with a clear head. The ascription of belief and resolution, here, as well as the various “fullness and clarity” qualifiers, are not simple reports of phenomena that are uncontroversially available to anyone with a set of working eyes and a basic competence with words like ‘belief’, ‘choice’, ‘full’ and ‘clear’. We are engaged in an interpretive enterprise when we say these things, and the enterprise cannot start with the datum that there exist unclouded, wholehearted resolutions that are contrary to the agent’s full-fledged, fully aware normative judgments. We would have to work up to that, and we wouldn’t be able to do that without engaging in the kind of reflection we are engaged in when we think about (for instance) how to understand normative judgments. Anyone who makes
pronouncements about these things is going to be “in the grip of a theory.” There simply is no other way.

When Davidson says that it “seems absolutely certain” that certain kinds of akratic actions exist, he is approaching the issue in a particular way. He is thinking of actions as a certain kind of event, and he is asking whether there exist events of this kind that have a certain pair of properties (roughly: being fully chosen, and being contrary to the agent’s clear-headed normative judgment). I don’t think that’s wrong, exactly, but I think it can obscure things. It can lead us to talk about choices, normative judgments, clear-headedness, and so on in a way that is detached from the practical and interpretive enterprise in which these notions have their home. (This is what happens, I think, when philosophers offer up bare-bones descriptions of some possible akratic and say things like “there is no reason to think the person so described didn’t choose to do what he did,” or “there is no reason to suppose that the person so described changed her mind about what she ought to do,” and so on.)

The question about akrasia seems to me better posed in this way: In those cases where we are inclined to say that someone is acting in a way that conflicts with her normative views (or when we are inclined to think this about ourselves), can we make sense of the agent’s mind as being wholly unclouded, and of the agent as being fully aware of the relevant features of what she’s doing, fully aware of the normative view that she allegedly holds, and so on; and can we make sense of her action as being wholly free from compulsion, fully endorsed by the agent, and so on? I doubt that we can do this, but even if I’m wrong about that, this will not be something that is wholly obvious – something of which we could be “absolutely certain” before we have thought through the philosophical and interpretive issues that the question raises. So I don’t think it’s necessarily a sign of defect if some line of reflection leads us to embrace a view that rules out the
possibility of extreme akrasia. I don’t think it’s obvious that extreme akrasia is something we need to accommodate; I just don’t know what to say about it until I’ve spent some time reflecting on the nature of normative judgment, reflective self-government, and other related phenomena. In other words, this seems to me like a place where we should let our theories dictate what we say about the cases, rather than the other way around.

No doubt we are aware, through introspection and through our interactions with others, of something in our experience which involves a kind of conflict between our normative beliefs and our behavior, and which deserves to be called ‘akrasia’. But it is not at all obvious that in order to accommodate what we are aware of we need to accommodate the truth of a precise philosophical thesis of the sort that the practical cognitivist is committed to rejecting. It is enough, I think, to explain the phenomenology and the characteristic defect that such cases involve, and to explain why it would be natural to describe them in terms of the agent’s acting against her normative beliefs. And the account I’ve sketched here is able to do these things.
Chapter 5

Practical Correctness

5.1 Framing the issue

In Chapter 3, I introduced what I called the residual-questions argument for practical cognitivism. The central idea behind that argument was that, if normative judgments were not what the practical cognitivist says they are, then we would need a different sort of judgment that could do the same job. We would need concepts with which to formulate these judgments, and if normative concepts like OUGHT and REASON didn’t serve that purpose, then we’d need other ones that did. For argumentative purposes I briefly introduced the idea of using concepts with subscripted ‘p’s – OUGHT_p and REASON_p – to play this role. I then suggested that, once we see how judgments deploying these concepts would work, they begin to look very much like the sorts of things we would have been inclined to call ‘normative judgments’ all along. They look like the sorts of judgments people make when they are thinking about what they ought to do.

Toward the end of that argument (§3.4), I suggested that any appeal to robust representations in an account of normative judgment will come out looking superfluous, once we have taken the lessons of the residual-questions argument to heart. Once we have conceded that normative judgments must involve an element of practical commitment, and once we have granted that the “cognitive” part of normative judgment must itself be practical, there seems no good reason to go on insisting that such judgments be understood as robust representations of normative reality. Practical commitments can do all the necessary work on their own, I suggested, and nothing important is lost by rejecting a robustly representational account of normative judgment.

One reason for being skeptical about this last claim I have already addressed. We do not need to think of normative judgments as robust representations of normative reality in order to
account for the possibility of akrasia. In fact, I have suggested, we can make far better sense of akrasia by thinking of it as the practical cognitivist does – i.e., as a kind of agential failure or breakdown.

But there is another reason for skepticism about the charge of superfluity that I have yet to address. Many philosophers think that we need to think of normative judgments as robust representations of normative reality, because alternative views make normative thinking out to be ultimately groundless or arbitrary in a way that would importantly undermine our normative practices. The worry here is familiar from discussions of non-cognitivism, expressivism, and quasi-realism.¹ It is difficult to articulate, but one natural way of putting it is in terms of a concern about correctness and objectivity. If our normative judgments were (just) expressions of practical commitment, the thought goes, then they could not really be correct or incorrect – at least not in any objective sense.

There is a simple response to this concern which I think is ultimately correct, but which is unlikely to be fully satisfying on its own. The response goes like this. When we think of normative judgments as expressions of practical commitment, we do not thereby cease to think of them as judgments. And if normative judgments are indeed genuine judgments, then they are capable of being correct in a rather straightforward sense. In general, the judgment that \( p \) is correct if and only if \( p \).² So, for example, the judgment that people ought to keep their promises is correct if and only if people ought to keep their promises. Whether people ought to keep their promises is a practical question, on this view, and hence the question of whether this particular judgment is correct is (in

¹ For some attempts to articulate the worry in this context, see (Shafer-Landau 2003), (Peacocke 2004), (Egan 2007), (Enoch 2011), (FitzPatrick 2011), and (Parfit 2011).

² See the discussion of minimal correctness in §1.3 above.
part) a practical question. In order to answer it, we have to engage in some practical thinking ourselves – we have to figure out whether people ought to keep their promises. If we want to know whether this judgment is correct in some “objective” sense, we need to figure out whether people ought to keep their promises even in cases where they don’t want to keep them, even in cases where they think it’s okay to break them, and so on. But this again calls for practical thinking – in particular, thinking about the conditions under which people ought to keep their promises, and whether these conditions include various facts about people’s desires and beliefs. Nothing in practical cognitivism rules out the possibility of objective correctness.

As I say, while I think this kind of response is ultimately correct, I do not expect it to be fully satisfying on its own. Lingering worries remain, even once we have rehearsed these familiar lines about “minimal” correctness. One wants to ask: if it’s built into the idea of a judgment that it’s the sort of thing that can be correct, then why should we grant that what the practical cognitivist calls ‘normative judgments’ really are genuine judgments? Why should we think of the formation and expression of practical commitments as a genuinely cognitive enterprise in the first place? Moreover, even if we grant that practical commitments are a kind of judgment, and hence that they can be correct in a minimal sense, won’t it still be true that these judgments are not really grounded in anything that exists “out there in the metaphysics?” And won’t that mean that our normative judgments are not really “objective” in the sense that matters? These are, I think, some of the deepest and most important issues dividing practical cognitivists from their opponents, and they will occupy us for the rest of the dissertation.

My discussion of these issues will proceed in two stages. The first stage will attempt to show that we’re all committed to thinking that some practical commitments can be correct or incorrect, and that there’s no intelligible sense in which we could be mistaken about this. This
stage of the discussion will also help to further elucidate the sense in which practical thinking is a kind of cognitive enterprise. It won’t tell us which normative judgments are correct, but it will show us that normative judgments are the kinds of things that can be correct or incorrect. The second stage will take up the question of whether our normative practices need to be vindicated from a distinctively ontological or metaphysical point of view, and it will aim to cast further doubt on the idea that our normative judgments would be importantly undermined unless they had a robust, ontological backing of the kind that theoretical cognitivists want to provide. This stage of the discussion will help to illuminate the sense in which our concerns about vindication are ultimately normative, and it will defend the “quietist” idea that a proper vindication of our normative judgments must come from within normative practice. The rest of this chapter focuses on the first stage; I turn to the second stage in Chapter 6.

5.2 An argument for practical correctness

I want to argue for the truth of the following claim:

Practical Correctness: Some practical commitments are correct, and others are mistaken.

I believe that this claim has the status of an a priori practical truth. It is a claim whose truth can be seen to follow from within anyone’s deliberative perspective, because it gives expression to an abstract commitment that is built into that very perspective. Here I will attempt to illustrate this by drawing on some transcendental arguments offered by Gibbard and Korsgaard.³

³ The material presented below was inspired by Gibbard’s arguments about fundamental authority and being a unified planner over time (Gibbard 1990: Ch. 9; Gibbard 2003: Chs. 13-14), and by Korsgaard’s arguments against private reasons and against particularistic willing (Korsgaard 1996: 132-145; Korsgaard 2009: 72-80). Those arguments are couched in different terminologies and presented with different dialectical aims, and so rather than engaging with
Before I begin, I need to make some preliminary remarks. The argument here will of necessity have to start small. It may seem at various points that the notions of correctness and mistake that I am working with must be very “thin” or “subjective.” This appearance is, I believe, merely a product of the way that I must present the argument, since I cannot do it all at once. So my strategy will be to first get you on board with these apparently thin or subjective notions of practical correctness and mistake, and then to convince you that they are not really thin or subjective at all – that in fact they are as objective as anything we could reasonably want here. But it will take some work before I am in a position to convince you of that.

Let us begin, then, with a familiar observation. Making a practical commitment is different from making a prediction about what you will do. Deciding to mow the lawn this afternoon, for instance, is different from making a prediction about how likely you are to mow the lawn this afternoon. The former involves an active resolution to bringing something about, whereas the latter need not implicate your agency in this way.

Now let me extract a consequence of this fact about decisions and practical commitments: you cannot coherently make a practical commitment while at the same time thinking that absolutely any change in your circumstances would be a perfectly good reason to abandon that commitment. If you think that any possible change in your circumstances could be a good reason to abandon your decision to do something, then you haven’t really decided to do it. In other words, the following claim captures an important truth about the nature of practical commitment:

_____________________________
them directly I have tried to synthesize the points that are important for my purposes and to present them in my own way.

4 Remember that we are assuming the truth of practical cognitivism here, so “thinking that any change in circumstance would be a perfectly good reason to do X” must be read as expressing a particular kind of practical state: the state you are in when you are “practically open” to revising your decision in response to any possible change in your current circumstances.
Claim 1: You can’t coherently make a practical commitment while at the same time thinking that absolutely any change in your circumstances could be a perfectly good reason to abandon your commitment.

Let me try to spell out the reasoning behind this claim in a bit more detail. Suppose that at time $t_1$ I decide to φ at some later time, $t_2$. I want to show that I can’t coherently make this decision and also think that any possible change in my circumstances could be a reason to change my mind.

To begin with, notice that when I make this decision, I know that my current circumstances – call them ‘C’ – will not be identical to the circumstances in which I am to carry out my decision. At the very least, the time will be different. But so will countless other things, such as the positions of my limbs, the positions of various leaves and blades of grass, the locations of various people in nearby and remote parts of the world, the number of gallons of water drunk by people in China in the past hour, and so on. The vast majority of these possible changes in circumstance will of course be utterly irrelevant from the point of view of the commitment I am making at $t_1$. But not all such changes will be irrelevant. Some such changes will bear directly on my decision, either by making it unreasonable for me to carry it out (e.g., if φ-ing at $t_2$ becomes enormously costly in ways I hadn’t anticipated), or by canceling or undermining the reasons for which I made the decision in the first place (e.g., if I decided to φ in order to achieve some end, but at $t_2$ my circumstances are such that φ-ing would no longer achieve that end). When my circumstances change in these ways, my decision is (I think) no longer be binding on me. This is an important point, and I’ll come back to it below.
Now suppose that, as I made my decision at $t_1$ to $\phi$ at $t_2$, I thought that any possible change in my circumstances could be a perfectly good reason to abandon this decision. Then I would think that my decision is only binding on me in my current circumstances, $C$. After all, if any possible change in $C$ could be a perfectly good reason to abandon this very decision, then once I have made the decision I will be free to abandon it at any moment, for any reason whatsoever, and this change of mind will be perfectly fine, so to speak, from the perspective of the decision I am making at $t_1$.

Now, trivially, if my decision is only binding on me in $C$, then it is not binding on me in any alternative set of circumstances, $C'$. And so it is not binding on me at $t_2$, where (as I know) the circumstances will inevitably be different from $C$ in countless ways. And if my current decision is not binding on me at $t_2$, then it does not commit me to doing anything in particular at $t_2$. But if I have not committed myself to doing anything in particular at $t_2$, then clearly I have not decided to $\phi$ at $t_2$. So, if I think that any possible change in my circumstances could be a perfectly good reason to abandon my decision to $\phi$ at $t_2$, then I haven’t really decided to $\phi$ at $t_2$. This establishes the truth of Claim 1.\(^5\)

The reasoning here underscores an important point that I mentioned a moment ago. In order to coherently engage in practical activity, which involves making decisions and carrying them out, we need to make some kind of implicit distinction in our practical thought between changes in

\(^5\) This presentation of the argument exploits the fact that decision and action are temporally extended, as well as the fact that (as we all know) no two circumstances at $t_1$ and some later $t_2$ will ever be exactly alike. It is natural to wonder whether a similar conclusion would apply to “instantaneous” actions or decisions, if there are such things. I believe that a similar point does apply, but it is more difficult to show this. Korsgaard (1996: 231ff.; 2009: 79) suggests that the essential point here (which she puts in terms of universalizability) is that, when you make a decision, there is a part of you that could resist your decision. This suggests a way of extending the argument to cover instantaneous decisions. The idea would be that, even if you make an instantaneous decision, you must think that the decision you are now making would be binding on you even if some other part of you were to resist it on this very occasion. Hence the mere (hypothetical) fact that some other part of you resists your decision on this present occasion could not be a reason to do something else instead – or so you are committed to thinking when you make the decision. I think this is a promising line of argument, but I will not attempt to pursue it further here.
circumstance that are relevant to our current decision and changes that aren’t. And this implicit distinction reflects our sense of what sorts of considerations count as good reasons for changing our mind about what to do. Korsgaard nicely illustrates this point with the example of someone who makes a decision on Monday to go to the dentist on Tuesday. She writes:

When I commit myself (on Monday) to going to the dentist on Tuesday, I know that on Tuesday I will be subject to a different set of potentially motivating factors, or incentives, though I don’t know exactly which ones they will be. ... Suppose I take it that any possible motivating factor to which I might be subject provides me with a good reason to cancel the appointment. That means that when Tuesday comes, unless it happens that I want to go to the dentist more than anything in the world, I won’t go to the dentist. Or to put the point more properly—it means that when Tuesday comes, I won’t go to the dentist, unless I decide to go to the dentist on Tuesday. But if all that I am doing on Monday when I commit myself to going to the dentist on Tuesday is committing myself to doing whatever I will decide to do on Tuesday regardless of my decision on Monday, then obviously I am not doing anything at all. (Korsgaard 2009: 78)

Korsgaard puts the point here in terms of reasons, as I did above. But in the present context it can be helpful to rephrase it in terms of deliberative questions: what we are supposing is that someone makes a practical commitment, while being fully prepared to re-open the practical question that she settled in making that commitment, in response to any consideration whatsoever that might prompt her to re-open it. And Korsgaard’s point, I take it, is that there would be nothing for such a commitment to be. A commitment has to close off at least some deliberative possibilities for the agent who makes it, on pain of not really being a commitment at all. To make a decision is to commit oneself to doing something, and this consists in giving a certain shape to one’s deliberative/motivational landscape. That is part of what makes decision distinctively active in a way that sets it apart from mere prediction. But if the agent is fully open to abandoning her “decision” at any moment, in any possible circumstances, in response to any possible consideration whatsoever, then she hasn’t given any shape to her deliberative landscape at all, and there is no sense to be made of the claim that she has committed herself to doing something.
So I submit that Claim 1 captures an important truth about the nature of decision and practical commitment. And it follows from Claim 1 that, when you decide, in circumstances C, to \(\varphi\) at \(t_2\), you commit yourself to the truth of the following claim:

Claim 2: There are some circumstances other than C such that this very decision (the one you are now making) is binding on you in those circumstances.

This is just a way of stating the basic idea that was driving the reasoning above. And on reflection it should be fairly obvious. There are *countless* circumstances that meet this description – all of the ones that come about through irrelevant changes in your current circumstances, such as the number of blades of grass in the United States, the color of your neighbor’s hair, the clothes you are wearing, how much water the people in China have drunk in the past hour, and so on. All of these things are fixed in your current circumstances, and they may well change when the time comes to carry out your decision at \(t_2\). But that doesn’t matter, because those changes would be irrelevant. They have no bearing on your current decision.

Now, if *all* of the changes that occur from \(t_1\) to \(t_2\) are of this kind – if they are all irrelevant – then the circumstances you find yourself in at \(t_2\) will meet the description in Claim 2: they will be circumstances in which the decision you made at \(t_1\) is binding on you. Of course, when you make a decision, you need not fully settle in advance exactly which changes would be relevant. All that Claim 2 says is that you’re committed to thinking there are *some* circumstances, not identical to your current ones, such that the decision you are now making will be binding on you in those circumstances. From your point of view, these will be the circumstances in which you
have no good reason to abandon your decision. Any alternative set of circumstances, C’, that differs from C only in ways that are irrelevant will meet this description.

Suppose we use ‘C+’ to designate the set of all circumstances that meet this description. By definition, then, any C’, C”’, C””’, etc., in C+ will be such that, in those circumstances, the decision you make in C is still binding on you. Again, you need not know exactly what all of the circumstances in this set are. The point is just that you’re committed to thinking that there is some such set. Otherwise, you would not really be making a decision – as we have just seen.

Given Claim 2, then, and given how we have defined ‘C+', you are also committed to the following claim:

Claim 3: It would be a mistake to abandon your decision in any of the circumstances in C+.

Claim 3 just continues to extract what is in some sense already contained in the act of making a decision. By a kind of abstraction, we have managed to construct a name, ‘C+', that designates all the circumstances in which the decision you are making at t_1 is binding on you. Since that decision

---

6 Compare (Korsgaard 2009: 78). A number of philosophers have objected to Korsgaard’s claim that reflective agency requires universal principles by insisting that a reflective agent could act in a unified way while accepting “singular edicts” that apply only to the particular circumstances in which the agent currently finds herself (e.g., Cohen 1996, Bratman 2007). The reasoning described above suggests a response to those objections. The key is to ask what these philosophers mean, exactly, when they say that the “singular edicts” apply only to the particular circumstances in which the agent currently finds herself (e.g., the number of blades of grass in the United States)? And isn’t this because these changes are irrelevant, or because they do not give the agent any reason to change her mind about what to do? And won’t there be other such changes that are relevant, either because they give the agent a reason to change her mind, or because they undermine the reasons for which she accepted the so-called “singular edict” in the first place? If so, then the so-called “singular edict” is not really singular: it is a principle that applies in other possible circumstances beyond those in which the agent currently finds herself (namely, all of those circumstances in which the agent has no good reason to change her mind).

7 There is an issue here about how to characterize C+. Is it the set of circumstances in which your current decision is binding on you, or the set of circumstances in which you think your current decision is binding on you? I intend the
is binding on you in these circumstances, it would be a mistake – a practical mistake – to abandon it in those circumstances (or so you are committed to thinking). This is something you are committed to accepting at $t_i$, and you can come to appreciate this from within your own deliberative perspective by going through the reasoning just described.

But now, if you are committed to Claim 3, then obviously you are also committed to:

**Claim 4:** Some practical commitments are mistaken.

Claim 4 is just an abstraction from Claim 3; the commitments that you’re committed to thinking mistaken are precisely the ones mentioned in Claim 3. Since you think that these commitments – the ones you would take on by abandoning your decision in C+ – are mistaken, you must think that *some* practical commitments are mistaken.

Now, if you think that some practical commitments are mistaken, you must also think that some such commitments are correct. Consider, for example, the commitment to avoid making any of the mistaken practical commitments. If some practical commitments are mistaken, then surely the right thing to do is to avoid them. So this commitment is correct; it is the right commitment to make.⁸

---

⁸ You may be tempted at this point to ask *what it is* for some practical commitment to be correct or mistaken. I do not think we can say anything more informative than this: for some practical commitment to be correct is for it to correctly answer the question that it purports to answer. To speak grammatically of questions and their corresponding answers here, we need to use normative language. The question that your commitment purports to answer is the question of whether (you ought) to avoid making certain commitments (i.e., the ones that would be involved in abandoning your decision in C+), and this commitment is correct just in case you ought to avoid making those commitments. You have
Here is another way of illustrating the point. Claim 3, the claim that it would be a mistake to abandon your decision in any of the circumstances in C+, marks out a particular region in the space of practical possibilities, and it says that all of the commitments in that region are mistaken. When you make your decision at t₁, you are committed to thinking that, if you made any of those commitments – if you came to occupy that region of practical space – you would be making a mistake. So you had better stay out of that region. You had better only make commitments that are compatible with your not making that kind of mistake. This thought is itself an expression of a very general practical commitment – a commitment to avoiding mistaken commitments – and you’re committed to thinking it is correct. After all, if you rejected it – if you thought it was okay to make any of the mistaken commitments referred to in Claim 3 – then you wouldn’t really be making a decision at t₁, as the reasoning above has already shown.

It follows that, when you make a decision at t₁, you’re committed to the claim we wanted to establish, namely:

Practical Correctness: Some practical commitments are correct, and others are mistaken.

Practical Correctness is something we’re all committed to as beings who have to make decisions and practical commitments. It is what Gibbard (2003: 92) calls an “a priori practical claim,” in that we are committed to accepting it simply in virtue of being the sorts of creatures who have to make up our minds about what to do. Since we have no choice but to do that, we have no choice but to accept Practical Correctness.

---

no choice but to think that you ought to avoid making those commitments, and so you have no choice but to think that this commitment of yours is correct.
The notions of correctness and mistake here are the “minimal” ones that I have been working with since Chapter 1 – the ones that come along for free with the apparatus of questions and answers that marks out the domain of the cognitive. To better understand why talk of correctness and mistake is appropriate here, it will help to think a bit more about the underlying features of practical commitment that drive the above argument.

5.3 A related argument: Gibbard on the cross-temporal validity of plans

The argument I just presented attempts to extract consequences from the fact that, when you make a decision (or any kind of practical commitment, for that matter), you necessarily take your commitment to have a kind of cross-temporal and cross-circumstantial validity. You take that commitment to be binding on you not just now, but over time; not just in these precise circumstances, but in other possible circumstances that might differ in countless ways from the ones you’re currently in. It will be helpful to briefly consider a related argument by Gibbard that also appeals to this fact.

As Gibbard observes in discussing his notion of a “plan,” it is essential to the very idea of making a plan that we take our plans to settle our thinking about what to do, not just right now at this very moment, but in the future as well – so long as no relevant changes occur. Thinking of our own plans in this way is necessary for us to be single, unified agents who persist through time, continuing the thinking and planning of our earlier selves. Gibbard puts the point this way:

[A planner] can of course come to reject a plan that he has earlier made. He doesn’t, though, at each instant treat his earlier thoughts on what to do as mere possibilities for what to think now. To do so would be to fragment his planning over time in a way that would be paralyzing. And since he has to join earlier thoughts with later ones, he has to regard them as compatible or incompatible. He must regard himself as still accepting what he previously concluded, or as changing his mind. For a single person over time, then, plans must act as judgments: one must be able to accept or disagree with determinations one has previously made. (Gibbard 2003: 271)
That seems right as a point about practical commitments in general. If you didn’t treat your own practical commitments as things that you could continue to accept, or come to disagree with, you would not be a single, unified agent whose practical thinking unfolds over time. Your “practical thinking” would instead be a series of unconnected mental events, like a string of headaches, or a parade of blind urges. The idea here is easiest to see in the first-person case. It’s not as though when I make a decision at one moment, I am then related to that decision at the very next moment as a mere fact about the past, something that I must now take into account when deciding what to do in this new, present moment. I’d never get anywhere in my practical activity if my decisions were like that; indeed, I wouldn’t be able to conceive of myself as making decisions or engaging in practical activity at all.

So I can’t treat all of my own practical states as having no bearing at all on how I am to conduct myself at other times and in other circumstances beyond the ones I’m presently in. I have to think of my decisions and practical commitments as having some bearing on how I can answer questions of what to do at later times. And this means that I can’t regard a change in my own commitments as a “mere change” in mental states, like the change that occurs when I go from having a headache to not having one. Rather, I have to regard a change in commitment as involving a kind of disagreement – a disagreement with my earlier self. I previously made a certain commitment, and now I reject that commitment, and in doing so I disagree with my earlier self: I disagree with what I earlier thought about what to do.

---

9 This is, I think, one of the points that Korsgaard is making in her argument against particularistic willing.

10 Of course I can change my mind about what to do, but I need a reason to do that, and that’s part of the point here. More on this below (§5.5).
Suppose, to use an example of Gibbard’s (2003: 70), that in the morning Plato decides to spend the rest of his life in Athens, and then, just after trimming his beard in the afternoon, he decides to leave the next day (and suppose he hasn’t gained any relevant information in the meantime). There are two changes here: a change of beard, and a change of plan. The fact that Plato’s beard is now short, whereas before it was long, is what we might call a “mere difference.” It is not itself an instance of Plato disagreeing with his earlier self (though it may of course be the result of such disagreement, e.g., if Plato changed his mind about whether long beards are best and that’s why his beard is now short). You can have a long beard at one point and a short beard at some later point without thereby being in disagreement with your earlier self. Plato’s change of plan, though, is different. It is not a mere difference, like his change of beard. It is an instance of Plato disagreeing with his earlier self. Before trimming his beard, Plato planned to stay in Athens for the rest of his life; he now plans to leave the city tomorrow, and in doing so he rejects what he earlier thought. His change of plan lands him in disagreement with his earlier self. This is a consequence of the fact that, when Plato made his original plan to stay in Athens for the rest of his life, he had to take that plan to settle his later thinking about what to do. Because he had to regard his original plan in this way, he must regard his later decision to leave Athens as constituting a disagreement with his earlier thinking about what to do.

Practical commitments, then, must be the sorts of mental states with which you can agree or disagree. They are in this respect importantly unlike headaches, or blind urges, or mere whims. And to disagree with something is not merely to think that it is different. It is to think that it is wrong, or mistaken, or not-to-be-accepted. If P is a practical commitment and you disagree with P, you do not merely regard P as a commitment which you happen not to share; you reject P; you regard it as mistaken, as not-to-be-accepted. It follows that, when you make a practical
commitment, you must think that some commitments are mistaken – namely, the ones that “disagree with” your current commitment. So, for example, when Plato decides to stay in Athens for the rest of his life, he must think that a commitment to leaving Athens tomorrow is mistaken.\footnote{There is an important qualification here having to do with “permissive” decisions. If you decide to take a casual left at the fork while thinking that you could just as well go right, you need not think that a decision to go right would be mistaken. But that’s because your permissive decision to go left is part of a more encompassing commitment that permits going either left or right. What you’re committed to thinking mistaken in this case are commitments that disagree with this more general commitment, e.g., a commitment to avoid going left or right. I say more about permissive decisions below.} This attitude is built into the commitment he makes when he decides to stay in Athens; it is part of what is involved in taking that decision to settle his later thinking about what to do, which is what he must be doing in order to be making a decision at all.

These remarks give us the material for a kind of transcendental argument. We start by observing that, in order to engage in practical thinking, we must be capable of making practical commitments that function like judgments, in the sense that they are subject to agreement and disagreement, so that changing one’s practical commitments amounts to changing one’s mind (and hence disagreeing with what one earlier thought). But of course we are capable of engaging in practical thinking. Therefore, we must be capable of making practical commitments that function like judgments. And the status of practical commitments as judgments brings with it the applicability of basic notions of correctness and mistake. For making a judgment necessarily involves disagreeing with certain other judgments, and to disagree with a judgment is not simply to register a “mere difference,” but to regard the judgment as mistaken, or as not-to-be-accepted. Likewise, to agree with a judgment is not simply to register a similarity in attitude, but to regard the judgment as correct, or as to-be-accepted.

In this way, we can extract a commitment to Practical Correctness from the fact that practical states function like judgments. From the fact that we must make practical commitments,
and the fact that these commitments must function like judgments, it follows that we must think some practical commitments are correct and others are mistaken.

5.4 Worries about the argument

It might seem that the notions of correctness and mistake that we can get from the arguments I have just presented will have to be very “thin” or “subjective.” The claim that some practical commitments are mistaken, you might think, just means that some practical commitments “disagree” with my own current commitments; similarly, you might think, the claim that some practical commitments are correct just means that some such commitments “agree” with my current ones. And that doesn’t seem to be a kind of correctness or mistake worth caring about.

Let me distinguish three worries you might have here and then try to respond to each of them in turn. The first worry is that all I am committed to thinking when I make a practical commitment is that some practical commitments are compatible or incompatible with the one I am now making, and that they may be “correct” or “incorrect” only in that very thin sense. If I change my mind and make different commitments, then different things will be, from my point of view, “correct” or “incorrect.” The commitment to Practical Correctness thus places no constraints at all on my practical thinking. Call this the no-constraint worry.

The second worry is that the notions of correctness and mistake that figure in Practical Correctness have no interpersonal bite. Even if this claim could be shown to place restrictions of some kind on my own practical thinking, nothing would follow about whether other people’s commitments can be correct or mistaken. A commitment to Practical Correctness thus seems consistent with a kind of practical solipsism, according to which some commitments are correct (or mistaken) for me, but this has no implications for anyone else; similarly, other people may be
committed to thinking that *their own* practical commitments can be correct or mistaken, but this has no implications for me or anyone else. Call this *the intersubjectivity worry*. The third worry stems from a concern about transcendental arguments in general.\textsuperscript{12} The worry, in a word, is that even if the above argument succeeds, it only shows that we’re committed to *thinking* that Practical Correctness is true. It doesn’t show that this claim actually *is* true. Even if we are all committed to believing Practical Correctness, this belief of ours might be mistaken, and the above argument does nothing to rule out this possibility. Call this *the fallibility worry*. In the next three sections I will attempt to respond to each of these worries in turn, thereby fleshing out the relevant notions of practical correctness and mistake, and further clarifying how they emerge from the cognitive nature of practical commitment.

5.5 Response to the no-constraint worry

Start with the no-constraint worry. The worry here is that all I am committed to thinking when I make a decision is that some commitments are compatible or incompatible with my current decision, and that this places no constraints at all on my practical thinking. I believe that this worry is mistaken. To see why, it will help to begin with a comparison in the case of ordinary belief.\textsuperscript{13} I can’t coherently judge that it’s raining outside without being committed to the claim that, if someone in my exact circumstances judged that it’s not raining outside, he’d be making a mistake. So when I judge that it’s raining outside, I’m committed to thinking that some judgments are mistaken – namely, the ones that “disagree with” my current judgment.

\textsuperscript{12} For an influential statement of this worry, see (Stroud 1968).

\textsuperscript{13} For ease of exposition, I use ‘belief’ and ‘judgment’ interchangeably in what follows.
Of course it is true that, if I later change my mind and make a different judgment – e.g., if I come to think that the “rain” I saw was just part of an elaborate Hollywood movie set – then at that time my views about which beliefs are correct and which ones are incorrect will also change. But this is just a trivial consequence of the fact that I can only ever assess correctness from my own point of view, and at any time my own sense of what’s correct will be determined by what I currently believe. Nor does it mean that the notion of correctness at work here places no constraints on my thinking. It imposes at least the following important constraint: if I believe, right now, that it’s raining outside, then I cannot coherently change my mind about this without thinking that this change of mind is warranted by some relevant change in my circumstances.14 (That is why I had to specify that I came to believe the “rain” I saw was part of a Hollywood movie set.) After all, if I believe that it’s raining outside, then I believe that some incompatible states of belief are mistaken – namely, the ones that disagree with my current belief. And so long as I believe this, I cannot coherently change my mind in a way that would bring me into one of those mistaken belief states. In order to coherently transition into one of those belief states, I need to change my view of what my circumstances are like; I need to change my conception of my circumstances in a way that would (I think) give me a reason to change my mind about whether it’s raining outside – a reason that would undermine my current belief about which belief states are mistaken.

A parallel point applies in the practical case, although things are slightly more complicated there. This is partly because there are some changes of mind in the practical sphere that do not work quite like the case of ordinary belief. Suppose I am wandering aimlessly in a yellow wood,

---

14 Here ‘change in circumstances’ must be read broadly so as to include changes in my beliefs about what my circumstances are like. I am not, however, making the trivial point that in order to change my mind about whether it’s raining there must be a change in my beliefs about whether it’s raining. The point is rather that, in order to coherently change my mind in this way, I must take myself to have some reason to do so, and so I must think that my earlier conception of my circumstances was mistaken or misleading in some way.
and I casually decide to go left as I approach the fork, thinking that I could just as well go right. Then, when it comes time to make the turn, I change my mind and decide to go right instead. This change of mind is not incoherent, because my original decision was “permissive” all along with respect to the option of going right. I never ruled that option out in my practical thinking; as I approached the fork, I was okay with going in either direction, and I had simply “picked” the left path out of indifference.¹⁵

But although this casual decision to go left does not require me to disagree with the decision to go right, it does require me to disagree with other practical commitments. Imagine someone who thinks, bizarrely, that aimless wandering must be stopped at all costs. Whenever she finds herself wandering aimlessly, she stops dead in her tracks and begins to pray – and she thinks that to do anything else would be a mistake (suppose she has this commitment because she believes that aimless wandering does grave damage to one’s soul). Clearly I must disagree with that sort of commitment when I make my permissive decision to go left.¹⁶ I am committed to regarding such a commitment as mistaken, since it rules out actions that I deem permissible when I make my casual decision to go left. But then I cannot coherently change my mind in a way that would involve making that sort of commitment – I cannot come to think that aimless wandering must be stopped at all costs – unless I come to think there is some reason to change my mind in this way,

---

¹⁵ Gibbard (2008: 19) distinguishes between two “stages” of practical thinking. At the first stage, we form valences and preferences, thereby settling “what’s okay to do and what isn’t.” At the second stage, we “pick” from among the preferred alternatives (i.e., we pick one of the alternatives that we regard as “okay”). We can pick such an alternative without thereby being opposed to the other available alternatives. This is to be contrasted with “choosing from preference,” which involves ruling out incompatible alternatives. Roughly, if I choose to do X from preference, then I regard anything incompatible with doing X as “not okay.” Whereas if I merely “pick” X from among several available alternatives, I need not be opposed to any of those alternatives. The case described above is a case of picking in this sense.

¹⁶ More generally, my permissive decision rules out any practical commitment that itself rules out making such a permissive decision. The colorful example in the text is just one illustration of what such a commitment might look like.
a reason that would undermine my current belief about which commitments are mistaken (e.g., if I, too, came to believe that aimless wandering does grave damage to one’s soul). So even permissive decisions place some constraints on how I can coherently change my mind going forward.

Return now to the case of ordinary belief. When I judge that it’s raining outside, I’m committed to thinking that some judgments are mistaken (namely, the ones that disagree with my current judgment). Now, the fact that I am committed to thinking this is grounded in my judgment about the rain. But the kind of mistake that I am committed to here is not at all judgment-dependent. What I’m committed to thinking is:

(A) Someone would be making a mistake if she judged in circumstances exactly like mine that it’s not raining outside.

And this is importantly different from:

(B) Someone would be making a mistake if (i) she judged in circumstances exactly like mine that it’s not raining outside, and (ii) I myself happen to judge that it is raining outside.

If I accepted (B), then I would think that my own judgments about the rain could determine whether it’s a mistake to believe that it’s raining outside. But that would be absurd. And that is not what I

---

17 I focus on the case of mistake in what follows because it is easier to make my point, but the same reasoning applies for correctness.
think when I think that someone would be making a mistake if she judged that it’s not raining outside. The mistake that I think such a person would be making is independent of the fact that I happen to judge that it’s raining outside. From my point of view, it is not because I judge that it’s raining outside that someone who judges otherwise would be making a mistake, although it is because I make this judgment that I am committed to thinking such a person would be making a mistake. What I am committed to thinking, though, is just that she’d be making a mistake – not that she’d be making a mistake so long as I make this very judgment.

Again, the same line of reasoning applies in the case of practical commitments. When I decide to do something – donate a certain portion of my income to charity, say – I’m committed to thinking that I would be making a mistake if I abandoned that decision in a certain range of circumstances (namely, the circumstances in which I have no good reason to abandon it). And hence I’m committed to thinking that some practical commitments are mistaken (namely, the ones that would be involved in abandoning my current decision without good reason). Of course it is true that, if I were to change my mind and make some other decisions, then I would think that different commitments were correct or mistaken. If tomorrow I change my mind and decide to live a life of Scrooge-like selfishness, then I will be committed to thinking my earlier decision to donate was mistaken. But once again, this is just a trivial consequence of the fact that I can only ever assess correctness from my own point of view, and at any time my sense of what’s correct will be determined by what I currently believe.\footnote{Here I am of course assuming that the decision to donate to charity is not a “permissive” decision, like the decision to take a casual left at the fork. The reasoning still goes through for permissive decisions, although it’s more complicated to specify the relevant commitments. In general, though, when I make a permissive decision to do something, I am committed to thinking there are some circumstances other than my present ones in which it would be a mistake to make a commitment that rules out making the permissive decision.}

\footnote{Here I am using ‘belief’ broadly in a way that includes practical commitments: ‘what I currently believe’ means ‘the thoughts I currently endorse in virtue of having the practical commitments that I have right now’.
As before, this doesn’t mean that the notion of correctness at work here places no constraints on my practical thinking. It places at least the following important constraint: if I believe, right now, that I ought to φ at t₂ (roughly: if I have a practical commitment to φ-ing at t₂), then I cannot coherently change my mind about this without thinking that this change of mind is warranted by some relevant change in my circumstances. (That is why I had to specify in the permissive case above that I came to believe that aimless wandering does grave damage to one’s soul.) If I am committed to φ-ing at t₂, then I must think there are some practical commitments that are mistaken – namely, the ones that would involve abandoning this commitment for no good reason. And I cannot coherently adopt one of the commitments that I now regard as mistaken unless I come to think there is some good reason to change my mind in this way – a reason that would undermine my current belief that those commitments are mistaken.

When I make a practical commitment – when I make a judgment about what to do – I am committed to thinking that some practical commitments are mistaken (namely, the ones that “disagree” with my current judgment). As before, the fact that I am committed to thinking this is grounded in my judgment about what to do, but the kind of mistake that I am committed to is not at all judgment-dependent. When I decide to φ at t₂, for example, what I’m committed to thinking is:

(C) I would be making a mistake if, in some relevant circumstances (the ones that I earlier referred to as ‘C+’), I made a commitment that involved abandoning my decision to φ at t₂.²⁰

²⁰ Note that in the case of ordinary belief, the claim was that someone would be making a mistake if she made certain judgments, whereas here the claim is only that I would be making a mistake if I made certain commitments. I actually think that “someone” is warranted here, too, but I want to avoid phrasing it in that way for now in order to avoid
And this is importantly different from:

(D) I would be making a mistake if (i) in some relevant circumstances (the ones in C+) I made a commitment that involved abandoning my decision to \( \phi \) at \( t_2 \), and (ii) I happen to be committed at \( t_1 \) to \( \phi \)-ing at \( t_2 \).

As in the case of ordinary belief, the relevant notion of mistake here is, from my point of view, independent of the fact that I happen to have made this particular practical commitment at \( t_1 \). When I make the commitment at \( t_1 \), I am not thinking that the very fact that I’m making this commitment is what makes it the case that it would be a mistake for me to abandon it in C+. Again, what I’m committed to thinking is that it would be a mistake to make certain practical commitments under certain circumstances – not (or at least not only) that it would be a mistake because I have this very commitment.\(^{21}\)

### 5.6 Response to the intersubjectivity worry

worries that I am smuggling in a kind of objectivity prematurely. I address the transition from “I” to “someone” below (in §5.6).

\(^{21}\) One might also try to argue for this point by appealing to Korsgaard’s suggestion (mentioned in footnote 5 above) that, because I must make decisions under the guise of freedom, whenever I make a decision I’m committed to thinking the decision would be binding on me even if some part of me were to resist it on this present occasion. For if I think the decision I’m making right now would be binding on me even if some part of me were to resist it on this present occasion, then I must think that it would be a mistake to make whatever commitments would be involved in resisting the decision on this present occasion. And if I think this, I clearly cannot think that the mistakenness of the relevant commitments – the ones that “disagree” with the decision I am now making – depends on the fact that I happen to make this particular decision at \( t_1 \). After all, I think that I would be making a mistake if I were to resist this particular decision at \( t_1 \), and the situation where I resist that decision at \( t_1 \) is clearly one where I do not make the decision at \( t_1 \). So I cannot think that the mistake here depends on my making the relevant decision at \( t_1 \).
Turn now to the intersubjectivity worry. The worry here is that the notions of correctness and mistake that figure in Practical Correctness only apply to me, and not to anyone else. What I’m committed to in Claim 4 (the claim that some practical commitments are mistaken), for example, is just the thought that it would be a mistake for me to make certain practical commitments (in particular, it would be a mistake for me to decide not to φ in C+). And this need not imply anything at all about whether it would be a mistake for other people to make similar decisions in similar circumstances. Similarly, other people may be committed to thinking that it would be a mistake for them to make certain decisions, but this need not imply anything at all about whether it would be a mistake for me (or anyone else) to make those decisions.

It will be helpful to work up this worry by first addressing a related concern about the shareability of practical thoughts. I suggested above, in Chapter 2, that normative language allows us to formulate practical thoughts in a way that makes them shareable with others, and with ourselves over time (§2.2). If I am going to reason with other agents – indeed, if I am going to reason with myself – I need declarative language with which to state the thought that I’m having when I ponder a possible course of action and say, “Yes.” More generally, I need to be able to say that in such-and-such circumstances one ought to do X; that Y ought to be avoided at all costs; that p is a reason to do Z but not to do W; and so on. These claims give expression to various practical commitments that you or I or anyone else can consider and adopt in our practical thinking, and when we put them forward in a public language we are expressing views about issues that can in principle be understood and discussed by anyone who is capable of engaging in practical thought.

In making this last claim, I am assuming that it is possible for distinct agents to ask the same practical questions, and that it is possible for them to share the same practical commitments. And you might think that’s wrong. You might think that practical questions are essentially
personal in a way that makes it inappropriate to think of different agents as somehow asking the same questions or sharing the same commitments. My commitments are about what I ought to do, perhaps, and yours are about what you ought to do; but there is no such thing as a generalized commitment about what “one” ought to do.

If that’s how things are, then it does seem difficult to see how my own practical thinking could commit me to notions of practical correctness and mistake that apply not only to me but to other agents as well. If my own practical commitments are essentially personal in this way, why should they commit me to thinking anything at all about the commitments of other agents?

On reflection, however, the idea that all of my practical thoughts might be in principle unshareable with others seems rather implausible. To see this, consider again Gibbard’s point about the cross-temporal validity of plans and practical commitments (§5.3). In order to reason about what to do, I have to think of my own practical commitments as settling what to do, not just for me as I am right now in my present circumstances, but also for various possible future versions of myself in circumstances that will undoubtedly differ from my present ones in countless possible ways. When I make such commitments, I must regard them as the sorts of things that I could agree or disagree with at other times and in other possible circumstances. In this way, making practical commitments requires the ability to share practical thoughts with myself over time.

Now, it would be very strange if we could do this, but the thoughts we were having when we did it were in principle unshareable with others, because the very idea of sharing them simply made no sense. Practical thoughts are essentially such as to be shared with ourselves across variations in time and circumstance. Why then should they not be shareable across persons as well? What is so special about me that I can share practical thoughts with myself but not with anyone else? Of course it is true that I cannot make other people’s decisions for them, and that my own
decisions directly govern my behavior in a way that they do not govern the behavior of other people. But the same thing is true of ordinary beliefs. I can’t form other people’s beliefs for them, either, and my own beliefs figure directly in my own subsequent thinking in a way that they do not figure in the thinking of other people. But I can still share beliefs with them. In general, although I can’t form your mental states for you, I can form mental states that are shareable with you in the sense that, if you form the corresponding mental state for yourself, you will thereby agree with me about the matter in question. This point applies just as much to practical commitments as it does to ordinary beliefs.

Think of it like this. When I decide right now to do something at some later time, I in effect make a judgment that tells my later self what to do. This doesn’t automatically ensure that my later self will do the thing in question, since I may later change my mind and come to disagree with my earlier thinking. Making a judgment that tells my later self what to do is not a matter of forcing my later self to do something. It is, rather, making a judgment that is such that (i) if my later self accepts it, he will thereby share my current view about what to do in his circumstances, and (ii) I currently think my later self ought to accept this judgment.

But if I can make judgments that tell my later self what to do in this way, can’t I also make judgments that tell others what to do as well? Can’t I make a judgment that is such that (i) if some other agent accepts it, she will thereby share my current view about what to do in her circumstances, and (ii) I currently think the other agent ought to accept it? For example, can’t I judge not only that I ought to donate a certain portion of my money to charity, but that someone else in relevantly similar circumstances ought to do so as well? The other person may not agree with my judgment, of course – but then again, my later self may not agree with my current judgments, either. In both cases there is the possibility of disagreement, and in neither case does
my current judgment automatically ensure that the person to whom it applies will do what it says. The essential point here is just that my practical judgments need not be concerned solely with *me* and *my own doings*. They may be equally concerned with the doings of other agents.²²

There is thus a kind of generality built into practical thought: practical commitments purport to answer questions that are intelligible to any agent, questions that we can all understand and discuss. We can capture this aspect of practical commitments by characterizing them in impersonal language, e.g., as commitments about what one ought to do in various sorts of circumstances, rather than as commitments about what *I* ought to do in various sorts of circumstances. Since (for instance) Jane’s bare identity as *Jane* does not typically matter when we are thinking about, say, whether Jane ought to keep her promises – and since the same goes for Bob’s identity as Bob, and Barb’s identity as Barb, and so on – I can just voice my thoughts about promise-keeping by saying, “When one has made a promise, here’s what one ought to do.” In this way, impersonal language allows me to make explicit the *practical irrelevance* of particular facts about the bare identities of agents for questions of what to do, such as the question of whether to keep one’s promises in certain sorts of circumstances.

Return now to practical correctness and mistake, and to the worry that some practical commitments might be correct or mistaken *for me* but not for anyone else. For reasons that are related to what I have just been saying, I believe this worry is mistaken. To show this, I want again

---

²² There are, of course, further questions about how to characterize practical commitments that concern the doings of other agents. I find Gibbard’s discussions of hypothetical planning helpful here (Gibbard 2003: 48-53). The commitment expressed by, e.g., “Jane ought to do X” is like a hypothetical plan for what to do if in Jane’s shoes. I would add that this sort of commitment can be further characterized in terms of the constraints it places on how someone who makes it can coherently relate to Jane (e.g., she cannot coherently blame Jane for doing X), and on how she can coherently behave if she comes to believe (for some bizarre reason) that she is Jane (e.g., she cannot coherently come to believe that she is Jane and decide not to do X). I say more about this last point below.
to adapt some points that others have made elsewhere. The central idea behind my response can be summarized in terms of the following claim:

Intersubjective Constraint: I cannot coherently think that it would be a mistake for me to decide not to φ in some circumstances, C+, but that it would not be a mistake for anyone else to decide not to φ in circumstances C++, where the only relevant difference between C+ and C++ is that in C++ it is someone else who would be making the decision.

In other words, roughly, if I think that it would be a mistake for me to make some decision, then I am committed to thinking that it would be a mistake for someone else to make that decision in relevantly similar circumstances.

This claim seems to me obvious, so long as we are clear that the only difference between the two sets of circumstances is the identity of the agents involved. To be sure, there may well be relevant differences between me and another agent that could make it okay for her to decide not to φ in circumstances that are in many respects similar to my own. Maybe certain features of her psychology are different from mine; maybe she doesn’t have the same interests or desires or talents; maybe φ-ing would bring me great joy whereas it would bring her only mild satisfaction. Or maybe φ-ing in her case would have certain downstream effects that it wouldn’t have in mine.

---

23 Here I have been influenced especially by Thomas Nagel’s arguments in The Possibility of Altruism, and by Korsgaard’s arguments for public reasons in The Sources of Normativity (see Nagel 1970: Ch. X; Korsgaard 1996: Lecture IV). As before, rather than trying to engage directly with these arguments, I have tried to synthesize the points that I take to be essential for the current discussion and to present them in my own way.

24 As before, I focus on the case of mistake in what follows because it is easier to make my point, but the same reasoning applies for correctness.

25 Although there may be reasons for qualifying the Constraint in particularly strange cases; more on this below.
And so on. There are lots of possibilities here, but all of them require building some relevant differences into the circumstances – differences that go beyond the mere fact that in the one case I am the one deciding and in the other case someone else is the one deciding. In other words, what we have here are not cases where the only difference between C+ and C++ is the identity of the agent involved. Rather, we have cases that further specify C++ in a way that makes it intelligible to think that, in those circumstances, the person would not be making a mistake in deciding not to φ, even though I would be making a mistake if I were to so decide in C+.

It is worth noting that no actual agent has ever had to make a decision in circumstances that were exactly like those faced by another agent in all relevant respects save for the fact that the circumstances were faced by different agents. Indeed, it is difficult even to imagine such a case. To do so, we need to imagine two agents who have qualitatively identical psychologies, personal histories, abilities, relationships, and so on, and we need to imagine that their decisions are going to have exactly the same effects. I do not see how we can do this without supposing that the two agents are located in parallel universes that unfold in exactly the same way, with one of them being the “twin” of the other. Needless to say, that is not the situation any of us is actually in. The circumstances in which we make our decisions always differ in countless ways from the circumstances in which other agents make their decisions, and these differences are often highly relevant when we are assessing practical commitments. Personal histories matter a lot here, as do facts about the agent’s inclinations, tastes, preferences, hopes, dreams, fears, talents, beliefs, and so on. Similarly for facts about the community in which the agent lives, facts about the way that pursuing a certain action might affect various people (including the agent herself) in the future, facts about how a commitment to performing that action would interact with the agent’s other obligations, personal projects, psychic states, and so on. When we are considering the
Intersubjective Constraint, we have to control for all of these various facts; and once we do that, the Constraint seems eminently plausible. How could a certain decision be mistaken for me but not for you, if all of the relevant features of my circumstances that render this decision mistaken are also present in your circumstances as well?

Here is another way of making the point. ‘C+’ marks out a range of circumstances in which I believe my current decision would still be binding on me. Those circumstances reflect my sense of practical relevance. I do not arrive at a specification of C+ arbitrarily, but by thinking about how various possible changes in circumstance might bear on the decision I’m currently making. If the decision is to mow the lawn tomorrow, for example, then C+ will include a range of possible circumstances that includes things like this: the lawn still needs to be mowed (no one has mysteriously mowed my lawn in the middle of the night), there’s nothing unexpected going on that makes it enormously costly or dangerous to mow my lawn, and so on. In specifying these conditions, I think about various possible changes in circumstance, and I decide whether they have any bearing on the decision I’m currently making.

The key point here is that, when I fill out the circumstances in C+, I do not typically assign practical relevance to the bare fact that it is me who is making the decision. My bare identity as an agent – the simple fact that I am me, and not someone else – does not figure in my practical thinking as one of the things that’s relevant for deciding whether to mow the lawn tomorrow.\textsuperscript{26} What figures in my thinking are, if you like, various “worldly” conditions – things that may equally apply to other agents, should they happen to be similarly situated, and should they happen to have relevantly similar psychologies, personal histories, talents and abilities, needs and interests, and so on. Again, it might be that the other agent finds mowing the lawn incredibly laborious whereas I

\textsuperscript{26} Compare Nagel (1970: 107-108).
find it only mildly so; or it might be that we both find it equally laborious but respond differently to doing things that we find laborious; or it might be that the other agent simply doesn’t care about the condition of his lawn. But, again, all of these cases require building some relevant differences into the circumstances in which the other agent makes his decision – differences that go beyond the mere fact that in the one case I am making the decision and in the other case someone else is the one deciding. So cases that involve such differences cannot pose any counterexample to the Intersubjective Constraint. And if we imagine cases where no such differences obtain, it is difficult to see how there could be a mistake in the one case but not in the other.

To further illustrate this, let us consider the following case. Suppose that Harry lives in a world very much like ours, except that it is common knowledge in his world that there is a parallel, “twin” world in a galaxy far, far away. The twin world is an exact duplicate of Harry’s world, except that the people in that world have stars after their names (so Harry’s twin is called ‘Harry*’, for example). Suppose that Harry has reflected thoroughly on the question of what to do with his money when he dies, and he has decided to donate it to a certain charity. He has thought long and hard about this, and he’s concluded that this is the best thing for him to do with his money; indeed, to do anything else would be a mistake. He could give a thousand reasons for why this is the best thing to do, all of them perfectly sound. The charity is extremely effective; it does great work in addressing genuine problems that Harry cares very deeply about; Harry has tons of money and no obligations to give it to anyone else; and so on.

Now suppose, bizarrely, that one day Harry comes to believe that he is actually Harry*. (I don’t want to get too science-fiction-y here, so I’ll just stipulate that Harry acquires excellent evidence that he is actually living in the *-world, and that the discovery doesn’t cause any kind of shock that would interfere with the ordinary flow of life and mess up the example.) He still has all
the same properties, and the world is exactly like the one he thought he was in, except that he’s actually Harry*. The case is difficult to imagine, but try to imagine it, and then try to imagine Harry* reasoning as follows: “Well, the fact that I am not Harry means that I am free to do whatever I want with my money. Of course, the reasoning that I went through when I thought I was Harry – the reasoning that concluded in a decision to donate my money – was perfectly sound. And it would be a mistake for me to abandon that decision, if I were Harry. But since I am not Harry, that reasoning just doesn’t apply to me. I realize, of course, that none of the relevant facts have changed in my world; it is exactly like Harry’s in all relevant respects. The charity is still just as effective, the people it would help are still just as much in need, I still have just as much money and no obligations to give it to anyone else, and so on. But these facts do not give me any reason to donate my money to charity; they only give such reasons to Harry. Since I am not Harry, I’m not going to donate.”

The example is admittedly far-fetched. And it is probably true that, when someone thinks that some practical claim applies to him, he is not thinking of himself third-personally, as Harry* is thinking about Harry in the example above. But even so, the example helps to illustrate how bizarre it would be to think that the notions of practical correctness and mistake might apply only to oneself, and that they would have no bearing on anyone else who was in a situation exactly like one’s own in all relevant respects. It helps to bring out the irrelevance of my bare identity as a particular agent – the mere fact that I am me, and not someone else – from the point of view I occupy when I am thinking about what to do. Again, what matters from that point of view is not the fact that it is me who is making the decision, but all of the “worldly” facts that figure in my thinking about whether to make the decision.
I find these points compelling, but there may be room for resistance here. I can imagine someone insisting that Harry*’s thinking is objectionable, even bizarre, but that it need not be incoherent. Consider a slight variation of the case. Suppose that before Harry* came to believe he was Harry* – back when he still thought he was Harry – he engaged in some abstract practical thinking and came to endorse the following view:

The Importance of Being Harry: One ought to spend one’s money on frivolous pleasures, unless one is Harry, in which case one ought to use one’s money for good.

Here we are to imagine Harry* considering various possible facts that might obtain and settling what to do if they should obtain. And among the many facts he considers is the fact of being Harry. For some strange reason, he assigns that fact a special kind of practical relevance. In general, he thinks, when one is trying to decide how to spend one’s money, the decision to make is the one that would best allow one to pursue frivolous pleasures. But in the case where the agent making the decision has the property of being Harry, the decision to make is the one that would best allow one to do some good.

The example then proceeds roughly as before. Initially, when Harry* thinks that he is Harry, he goes through some reasoning and concludes that he ought to donate his money to a certain charity. Later, though, when Harry* ceases to believe that he is Harry, he no longer thinks that his general view about the importance of being Harry applies to his particular case, and so he concludes that he ought to use his money on frivolous pleasures. In the beginning, then, Harry* thinks that it would be a mistake for him to make a certain decision under certain circumstances (it would be a mistake for him to decide to spend his money on frivolous pleasures), even though
it would not be a mistake for some other agent to make the same decision under circumstances that are exactly alike in all relevant respects except for the identity of the agent involved. He thus violates the Intersubjective Constraint – coherently, perhaps – because of his view about the importance of being Harry.  

This view about the importance of being Harry is bizarre, and it is surely one that we ought to reject. It is simply not plausible to think that the mere fact of being Harry could have this kind of practical relevance. But it is not obvious to me – at least not on the surface – that we can rule this view out on grounds of incoherence. The view does seem to articulate a possible practical thought that one might entertain and decide to accept or reject. Just as Harry* might assign practical relevance to other possible facts – such as the fact that he is in pain, or the fact that he is tired, or the fact that he has some extra money – so too, perhaps, Harry* might assign practical relevance to the fact that he is Harry. This is a strange thing to do, of course, and it cries out for further explanation. One wants to ask: what is it about being Harry that makes it the case that he ought to use his money for good? Surely whatever reasons Harry might have for using his money in this way ought to be reasons for other people to use their money in this way as well. But Harry* does not think that Harry has any further reasons for using his money in this way, beyond the

---

27 One might challenge the example by saying that what Harry* thinks when he makes the original decision is not that it would be a mistake for him to decide to spend his money on frivolous pleasures, but that it would be a mistake for Harry to so decide (and he just happens to think that he’s Harry). But the thought in question here is about whether it would be a mistake for him – i.e., the one making the decision – to decide to spend his money on frivolous pleasures under certain circumstances, and it’s built into those circumstances that he (the one making the decision) is Harry. So he does think that, in those circumstances, it would be a mistake for him to make the relevant decision.

28 In saying this, I am expressing a substantitive evaluation of the practical commitment one would take on by accepting The Importance of Being Harry. In particular, I am expressing a commitment to rejecting a practical commitment that gives a certain kind of weight to a certain property (being Harry) when thinking about what to do with one’s money.

29 One might object that there is no such “possible fact,” since Harry* could not possibly be Harry. It is true that it is metaphysically impossible for Harry* to be Harry, but that is irrelevant for the example. What matters is that Harry* can coherently wonder whether he is Harry – he can entertain the thought that he, the one entertaining this very thought, might be Harry – and he can ask what to do if that’s the case.
simple fact that he is Harry. Since other agents do not share the property of being Harry, they do not share this particular reason of Harry’s.

Harry* does seem to be making a particularly egregious kind of mistake in endorsing this view. And there may well be a kind of incoherence lurking somewhere in the background here. It may be that thoughts about the identities of particular agents, and perhaps especially thoughts about one’s own identity as an agent, are somehow special in a way that rules out making these sorts of arbitrary distinctions among agents.³⁰ I have not been able to show this to my satisfaction, though, and so I want to conclude this discussion by offering the following, slightly qualified version of the Intersubjective Constraint:

*Intersubjective Constraint (Qualified Version)*: It would be deeply implausible for me to think that it would be a mistake for me to decide not to φ in some circumstances, C+, but that it would not be a mistake for anyone else to decide not to φ in circumstances C++, where the only relevant difference between C+ and C++ is that in C++ it is someone else who would be making the decision.

This slightly qualified version of the Intersubjective Constraint simply replaces ‘I cannot coherently think that …’ with ‘It would be deeply implausible for me to think that …’. The charge of “deep implausibility” here expresses a substantive evaluation of the practical views one would

---

³⁰ Korsgaard’s arguments against what she calls “the myth of egoism” seem to suggest something along these lines (see, e.g., (Korsgaard 1996: 144ff.)). Note, though, that Harry* as I’ve described him need not be an egoist or a practical solipsist. Harry* thinks that his general view about the importance of being Harry applies to everyone: he thinks it’s true of everyone that if he is Harry, he ought to spend his money for good. His commitment is thus not a personal one that he takes to apply only to himself (as is evidenced by the fact that he changes his mind upon discovering that he is not Harry). It is in this respect like the view that one ought to live a certain way if one is chosen by God, where it is somehow settled in advance that only one person will be chosen by God.
have to endorse in order to violate the Constraint (e.g., the view about the importance of being Harry). This latter formulation of the Constraint leaves open the possibility of a coherent Harry* like the one envisioned above. I leave the choice between these two versions of the Constraint as a topic for further investigation.

It is important to note that even the qualified version of the Constraint is enough to respond to the worry about intersubjectivity. The idea behind that worry is that an agent might agree that her own practical commitments can be correct or mistaken while refusing to acknowledge that the commitments of other agents might be correct or mistaken as well. The Intersubjective Constraint (in both forms) helps us to see what’s wrong with this idea. The problem, in a word, is that the idea requires us to make arbitrary distinctions among agents which are either incoherent or deeply implausible. The bare identities of particular agents simply do not have the kind of practical relevance that one would have to attribute to them in order to take the worry about intersubjectivity seriously. If some practical commitments are correct or mistaken for me, then similar commitments must be correct or mistaken for you as well – at least once we have controlled for relevant differences in circumstance.

5.7 Response to the fallibility worry

Let me turn now to the fallibility worry. Even if the above arguments succeed, you might think, what they show is just that we’re all committed to thinking that Practical Correctness is true. In general, though, we can’t establish the truth of some claim by simply showing that we’re all committed to thinking that it’s true. After all, we might all be mistaken. For all the arguments above have shown, then, Practical Correctness may yet be false, even though we’re all committed to thinking it’s true.
There are two related points that I want to make in response to this concern. The first point is that Practical Correctness is a practical claim, and as such it can only be understood and assessed from the deliberative perspective. And once we properly understand what the claim says, we see that it is a necessary truth; there is no coherent way of denying it, nothing for a denial of the claim to be.\(^{31}\)

Practical Correctness says that some practical commitments are correct and others are mistaken. Think of this claim as quantifying over all the possible practical commitments one might make and saying that at least one of them is correct and at least one of them is incorrect. Now, to think that some practical commitment is correct is to agree with it, or to accept what it says; similarly, to think some practical commitment is mistaken is to disagree with it, or to reject what it says. Practical Correctness can thus be thought of as expressing a very abstract practical commitment: a commitment to endorsing at least one practical commitment and rejecting at least one practical commitment. What would it be to think this claim is mistaken? It would be to reject the relevant practical commitment – i.e., to reject a commitment to endorsing at least one practical commitment and rejecting at least one practical commitment. But you cannot coherently do that. By rejecting this commitment, you are (trivially) rejecting at least one practical commitment. And if you reject some commitment, C, then you must at least endorse a commitment to rejecting C. So you cannot reject Practical Correctness; its acceptance is forced upon you by the very logic of

\(^{31}\) It can be difficult to appreciate the sense in which Practical Correctness is a necessary truth, because standard models for thinking about such truths have trouble accommodating practical truths, which can only be understood from the deliberative perspective. It is tempting to think that, if some truth can only be understood from the deliberative perspective, then it cannot really be a necessary truth, since if there were no deliberative creatures the truth would not “exist.” But this is already to impose a representationalist model on the idea of practical truth. The practical truth expressed by Practical Correctness does not “depend on” the existence of any practical thinkers, although it can only be appreciated by such thinkers. Compare: the truth that \(2 + 2 = 4\) can only be appreciated by creatures who are capable of engaging in mathematical thought. This does not mean that this truth somehow “depends on” the existence of such mathematically-reasoning creatures, although it does mean that appreciation of this truth depends on the existence of such creatures. The same point applies to Practical Correctness.
practical commitment. There is thus no room to accept Practical Correctness and still think, “But I might be mistaken.” There is no sense in which you could be mistaken about this – and that’s something you can appreciate by approaching the claim from within the deliberative perspective, by thinking about what it says and what it would be to deny it.

The second and related point is that the arguments canvassed above only seem to fall short of establishing Practical Correctness when they are described “externally.” When I am trying to describe the logic of practical commitment, I have to say things like “When you make such-and-such a commitment, you cannot then make such-and-such other commitments,” or “When you decide to do such-and-such, you must think that such-and-such is the case.” And that can make it seem as though the essential points here are primarily about us and our commitments, or about what we cannot help but think, rather than being about “what is really the case.” But when you actually go through the arguments, when you approach them from the inside – i.e., from the perspective from which practical claims are actually intelligible – what you come to see is that some practical commitments are correct and others are mistaken, and not just that everyone is committed to thinking this.32

5.8 Where this leaves us: practical reflection and the irrelevance of normative ontology

The claims I have sought to establish in this chapter are very abstract. I have tried to show that some practical commitments are correct and others are mistaken; that this is not an arbitrary stipulation, but something that grows out of the cognitive nature of practical thought; that the relevant notions of correctness and mistake place genuine constraints on our practical thinking; and that they apply not just “to me” but to everyone. None of this tells us which practical

commitments are correct and which ones are mistaken. In my view, that is a task for substantive practical reflection. To figure out which practical commitments are correct, we need to engage in some practical thinking ourselves – we need to figure out what to do and how to live, and our views about correctness and mistake will follow suit. My aim here has not been to carry out this task, but to address prior concerns about the very idea that practical commitments could be correct or mistaken. And I have done this with the hope that, once we have addressed these prior concerns, we will be free to engage in substantive practical reflection without having to worry about general skeptical doubts concerning the very possibility of getting things right in practical matters.

Practical commitments are genuine judgments that can succeed or fail to get things right, and this is something that you can come to appreciate from within your own deliberative perspective.

Let me conclude with a brief example to illustrate where I think this discussion leaves us. Suppose you judge that slavery is wrong. According to the practical cognitivist, this judgment expresses a certain kind of practical commitment – very roughly, a commitment to opposing slavery in various ways. Is this judgment of yours correct? How could it be, if it is just (an expression of) a practical commitment? If the judgment were an attempt to represent some portion of normative reality, we could say that it is correct because normative reality really is the way that the judgment represents it as being. But if the judgment is just a practical commitment, what could possibly make it correct or incorrect? Questions like these can lead to a kind of skepticism, because

---

33 There is much more to say, of course, about the kind of commitment that is expressed by this particular normative judgment. Not just any commitment to opposing slavery will amount to thinking that slavery is wrong, since one might be opposed to slavery in many different ways, and for many different reasons (e.g., one might oppose it only when convenient, and simply because doing so promises to boost one’s reputation; then one would clearly not count as thinking that slavery is wrong). The commitment expressed by this judgment will likely have close ties to certain emotional responses, such as guilt, outrage, indignation, and so on, and it will have to be grounded in or responsive to relevant features of slavery (e.g., the fact that it is an affront to human dignity, rather than the fact that tolerating it will tarnish one’s reputation). For attempts to spell out more specifically what is involved in such commitments, see (Gibbard 1990) and (Blackburn 1998). Since the point I am trying to make here is meant to apply to a wide range of views about the nature of these underlying commitments, I stick with the over-simplified example in the text.
they can make it seem as though our normative judgments stand in need of some kind of metaphysical or ontological backing.

I will say more about the felt need for a metaphysical backing in the next chapter. But from the practical cognitivist’s point of view, the first step in responding to these sorts of questions is to *domesticate* them. Don’t think about correctness in terms of the mind reflecting or not reflecting a world of values. Think about what the judgment is. It is a judgment that slavery is wrong. Is that judgment correct? That depends on whether slavery is wrong. How are we to figure out whether slavery is wrong? By thinking about whether to oppose it in the relevant ways. In other words, the question we need to answer, in order to determine whether your judgment is correct, is the very question you yourself have already answered by forming that judgment. We determine whether the judgment is correct by answering for ourselves the question that it purports to answer. The question here is whether slavery is wrong, and that is a practical question. We thus need to engage in some practical thinking ourselves in order to determine whether this judgment is correct – indeed, the very thinking that ought to have gone into the formation of that judgment in the first place.

Why should we think there is a correct answer to this question? Well, we have to accept that there are correct answers to some such questions. And suppose there were no correct answer to this particular question. That would mean that any answer is equally acceptable – we can answer the question however we like. But that simply isn’t true. Answers, in this case, are (expressions of) practical commitments. One answer to the question of whether slavery is wrong is: *that slavery is wrong*. This answer expresses (roughly) a commitment to opposing slavery in the relevant ways. Another answer is: *that slavery is not wrong*. This answer expresses (roughly) a practical commitment to not opposing slavery in the relevant ways. These two answers are not equally
acceptable. A commitment to opposing slavery in the relevant ways is acceptable, whereas a commitment to not opposing it in these ways is not. In saying this, I am, of course, making a normative (and hence practical) claim – a claim about which practical commitments are acceptable and which ones are not. But that is exactly the sort of claim that I should be making here. The question of which commitments are acceptable is a practical one; hence I give it a practical answer. I think practically about which commitments to accept, and I express my verdict by saying that the one commitment is acceptable and the other one is not. Such thinking is of course open to criticism, and you may disagree with my verdicts. (And if you do disagree, you can use the language of ‘mistake’ to voice your disagreement – you can say that I am mistaken, since that is what you think.) But the criticism and disagreement here will be fundamentally practical: they will be about which commitments to accept, not about which commitments (if any) manage to accurately reflect how things are in normative reality.

In order to fully appreciate this line of reasoning, it is vital to keep the idea that normative thinking is fundamentally practical clearly in view, and to set aside any lingering representationalist assumptions about what that thinking must be like. It can be tempting to think that we must be able to explain what makes an answer to some question correct by saying that it is the one that accurately represents reality. If we want to fully defend our answer to some question, then – on this way of thinking – we must be able to defend the idea that there is a metaphysical reality “out there” that the answer represents. If we approach things in this way, it will seem inevitable that normative reflection should eventually lead us out of the domain of practical thinking and into the domain of metaphysics: a full defense of our normative convictions will seem to require substantial theorizing about the nature of reality and how it could contain such things as values, obligations, rights, and so on. But if the questions we are concerned with here are
irreducibly practical, such theorizing is out of place. Practical questions do not call for an accurate representation of normative reality, and our answers do not purport to represent such a reality. How then could we explain the correctness of our answers by saying that there is a reality out there that they accurately represent?

The only thing we can do here is to answer the relevant practical questions, e.g., in this case, by thinking about whether slavery is wrong. If we answer that it is wrong, and someone asks what makes our answer correct, we can explain the reasoning that we take to support our answer. Such reasoning will advert to the various features of slavery that make it wrong, such as the immense suffering that it causes, the profound disrespect for human life that it displays, and so on. But whether these facts about slavery support the claim that slavery is wrong is itself a normative question (and hence, on this view, a practical question). It is a question of whether to oppose slavery for these reasons. To answer it, you have to engage in some practical thinking.

This approach allows us to do all the thinking we need to do. We can think about whether slavery is wrong, and why. We can criticize certain ways of thinking about that question as wrongheaded, confused, ignorant, hasty, and so on. We can disagree with different ways of answering it. We can disagree with different explanations of why slavery is wrong, and we can try to come up with better explanations. We just don’t need to add on a further layer of metaphysical claims about what grounds the correctness of all this thinking. We stop when we need to stop, which is when we have arrived at the most plausible case we are able to make in favor of our normative judgments. If someone challenges our judgments, or the case we have made for them, we can think about how to respond to the challenge – we can think about whether to revise our thinking, and how. All of this occurs squarely within the domain of practical thinking, as a part of reflective normative practice. If we then try to “step outside” of that practice and ask what makes
the whole enterprise justified, or legitimate, or worth engaging in, the response is that this is a
normative question, and that if we want to answer it we have to start the enterprise back up again.

I thus see practical cognitivism as leading to a kind of metaethical “quietism.”34 We can
engage in critical reflection about normative matters, but it follows from the very nature of
normative reflection that any criticism must come from within the domain of practical thinking.
Anything else would simply not be criticism. To point out that normative reflection is not an
attempt to form robust representations of normative reality, for example, is simply to make an
observation. If you want to turn that observation into a criticism, you need to say what’s wrong
with this – why it’s a bad thing that normative thinking is not fundamentally representational, or
why this makes normative practice defective in some way. But then you’ll be engaging in
normative debate.

This quietist stance can seem like a frustrating form of evasion if it is just baldly asserted,
as though we were simply “refus[ing] to philosophize when there are substantive issues to be
discussed” (Zangwill 1996, paragaph 8). But I believe that the position emerges as a natural and
attractive consequence of the view that normative thinking is fundamentally practical. If normative

34 For recent views that are often discussed under the heading of “metaethical quietism,” see (Kramer 2009), (Dworkin
2011), and (Scanlon 2014). The view I am sketching here shares important similarities with these views, and also with
quasi-realism (Blackburn 1993, 1998), (Gibbard 2003). It’s worth noting that at least two philosophers whose views
I take to be particularly clear examples of practical cognitivism – namely, Hare and Korsgaard – would not want to
endorse this “quietist” turn. Both of these philosophers think that the task of justifying our normative judgments must
eventually bottom out in an appeal to principles that are in some sense “inescapable” (principles that are constitutive
of reflective agency, for Korsgaard, and principles that are constitutive of universalized preference, for Hare), whereas
the quietist view I’m describing allows such justifications to bottom out in a substantive appeal to principles that seem
plausible on reflection. I believe the dispute here turns, at bottom, on a disagreement about what is required of us by
what Korsgaard calls the “rules of reflection” (Korsgaard 1996: 257-8). Hare and Korsgaard think that reflection has
in some sense not done its job until it has arrived at some ultimate justification of the kind they envision, whereas I
think we can rest content knowing that we have made a responsible and thorough attempt to arrive at a sound
understanding of the matter in question. A full development of this thought would require me to articulate coordinating
conceptions of reflection and understanding – particularly practical understanding – that could vindicate this kind of
anti-foundationalist approach. Alas, my attempts to do that – which were originally going to constitute the material
for a final Chapter 7 – have come up short. I leave this as a topic for further research.
practice is not a way of figuring out what normative reality is like, but is instead an attempt to figure out what to do, then any criticism of that practice will have to be aimed at showing that it falls short in some respect in the way that it answers questions of what to do. And any such criticism must be lodged from a perspective that has questions of what to do in view; it cannot be lodged from some wholly external perspective, such as that of normatively neutral metaphysics.

In the next chapter I will provide further elaboration and defense of this quietist idea.
Chapter 6
Metaethical Quietism

6.1 Introduction

The aim of the previous chapter was to show that normative judgments (as the practical cognitivist conceives of them) are the kinds of things that can be correct or incorrect. And the hope was that, once we’ve reached that conclusion, we will be free to engage in substantive normative reflection in order to vindicate particular normative views. I suspect, though, that many will think something important is missing from the picture that emerged at the end of that chapter. The lingering worry here stems, I think, from the idea that our normative judgments need a distinctively ontological kind of vindication. Even if there is a sense in which normative judgments can be correct or incorrect, the idea that such judgments are not purporting to represent anything that “exists out there in the world” can be disorienting. It can make us feel as though our normative practices have no grounding in anything real, and that can make them seem “second-rate.”¹

I agree, of course, that more can and should be said in support of particular normative views. What I reject is the idea that we must do something other than provide normative support for these views – that we must be able to give them a distinctively ontological or metaphysical vindication, e.g., by showing that they manage to represent something that really exists out there in the universe. In this chapter, then, I want to set aside questions about practical cognitivism in particular – at least for the most part – and to ask about this general idea. My aim will be to

¹ I take the phase ‘second-rate’ from (Shafer-Landau 2010: 494), who uses it to raise a worry like the one I’m describing in the text.
convince you that ethics needs no ontological vindication. We’ll then be free, I hope, to engage in substantive inquiry to support our ethical and normative views. But that last bit is where the argument of this dissertation leaves off; my aim in this concluding chapter is just to bring you to that last step. I leave the task of providing a non-ontological vindication of our particular normative views for a separate occasion, although I will offer some cursory remarks at the end of the chapter about how I think we might proceed in doing this.

I’ll start by saying a bit more about the kind of quietist view I endorse, before going on to present a normative argument in defense of that view.

6.2 The basic idea: ontological irrelevance

‘Quietism’ is a contentious word. In the context of metaethics, the term is often used to describe a kind of philosophical view or outlook which regards certain sorts of metaethical questions or debates as being somehow defective. Interestingly, the term has been used to refer to self-described “realists,” such as T. M. Scanlon, Ronald Dworkin, and Thomas Nagel, as well as self-described “quasi-realists,” such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard. And the usage is apt, to a certain extent: all of these philosophers have suggested in various ways that significant portions of contemporary metaethical discourse are somehow confused or unintelligible, or that they are simply irrelevant to our ethical and normative practices.

---

2 Because the concerns I am discussing in this chapter seem to me to arise most acutely in the case of specifically ethical values, I will speak mostly about ethics in what follows, but I do think the points I’m making here hold for the domain of practical normativity more generally.

3 See, for instance, Dworkin’s staunch denial of the substantive ethics vs. meta-ethics distinction in (Dworkin 1996, 2011); Scanlon’s remarks about moral judgments not needing metaphysical support (Scanlon 2003; 2014: Lecture 2); and Nagel’s remarks about objectivity and external reference in (Nagel 1997, Chapter 6). For quasi-realist suggestions along similar lines, see, for instance, Blackburn’s remarks about mind-dependence and relativism in (Blackburn 1993, Chapters 8-9) and Gibbard’s remarks about truth in (Gibbard 2003, Chapter 9).
Of these various criticisms, it is the last one – the charge of irrelevance – that will be of particular interest to me here. I do not think the charge of unintelligibility is particularly helpful, although I think I can see where those who make this criticism are coming from. But the quietist idea that interests me – and the one that I want to defend in this chapter – is the idea that certain kinds of metaethical projects, particularly those that aim to provide a kind of ontological vindication of our ethical and normative practices, are irrelevant and hence unnecessary. The questions that these metaphysical projects aim to address – questions such as whether the world really contains any such things as ethical properties, whether values really exist out there in the universe, and so on – even if they are intelligible, are nevertheless wholly disconnected from the underlying concerns about correctness and objectivity that are supposed to lend them their interest and significance. We would do best to find a way of thinking about ethics and practical normativity that lets us avoid asking these questions. Or so I want to argue.

The basic idea behind the quietist view I’m interested in, then, can be put roughly like this: ethics does not need a distinctively metaphysical or ontological foundation. In particular, our ethical judgments do not need to be “grounded in” or “vindicated by” metaphysical claims about the existence of ethical properties, truths, or facts. If we can make an adequate ethical case in favor of some judgment – for instance, if we can say that you shouldn’t push me down the stairs because that would cause me a lot of pain – then we don’t need to worry about whether these ethical judgments really represent how things are in reality, or whether they put us in touch with genuine ethical features of the world, or anything like that. Our ethical judgments are, in this sense, autonomous; they stand or fall on their own substantive merits.

As I said in Chapter 5, I believe that this view flows quite naturally from the practical cognitivist’s way of thinking about ethical judgment. If we understand our ethical judgments as
attempts to answer distinctively practical questions, then we won’t be tempted to ask certain kinds of metaphysical questions about the nature or existence of ethical reality; such questions will seem out of place. This idea is nicely summarized in a memorable passage from Ayer that we encountered above in Chapter 1, and which is worth quoting again here. Ayer is trying to explain why he thinks debates about the objectivity of ethics, as they were being conducted at the time, were misconceived, and he says:

The problem [that is, the problem of objectivity in ethics] is not that the subjectivist denies that certain wild, or domesticated, animals, ‘objective values’, exist and the objectivist triumphantly produces them; or that the objectivist returns like an explorer with tales from the kingdom of values and the subjectivist says he is a liar. It does not matter what the explorer finds or does not find. For talking about values is not a matter of describing what may or may not be there, the problem being whether it really is there. There is no such problem. The moral problem is: What am I to do? What attitude am I to take? And moral judgments are directives in this sense. (Ayer 1949: 179)

I think Ayer gets something importantly right here. I would put the point like this. Ethical judgments are distinctively practical; they aim to answer questions that are irreducibly practical in character. Such judgments are not best understood as attempts to form robust representations of some distinctively ethical portion of reality. The questions they aim to answer are not about how things are in ethical reality; they are questions about what to do and how to live. And the thought is that once we properly appreciate this point, once we understand ethical judgments in this way, we will no longer be subject to the kinds of concerns that have animated certain sorts of ontological projects in metaethics – for instance, concerns about how values could exist in a world like ours.

Let me emphasize that, when I say these things, I don’t mean to be rejecting all of metaethics (how could I?), nor do I mean to denounce any particular metaethical questions or projects as unintelligible or nonsensical. I simply want to say that if you understand certain ontological questions in a certain way – if you understand them as the sorts of questions that call for non-ethical theorizing about the nature of reality, in a sense that would require us to “step
outside” the domain of ethical thinking in order to answer them – then they could not have the interest or significance that many philosophers working in metaethics typically take them to have. Ontological questions about ethics – or at least the ones I’ll be considering here – are thus either “internal” to ethical practice, in a sense to be clarified as we go along, or else they are **irrelevant** to the underlying concerns that are supposed to give them their interest and significance. That’s the central idea behind the quietist view I’ll be defending here.

We can summarize these ideas in terms of the following thesis:

**Ontological Irrelevance:** Ethics does not need an external ontological vindication.

And for now you can just read ‘external’ as meaning, basically, ‘non-ethical’. I’ll be clarifying that as we go along, but the basic idea is that we don’t need to worry about certain kinds of ontological questions – such as the question of whether ethical values really exist, or whether there are really any such things as ethical facts – at least not if those questions are understood in a way that would take us, as Dworkin says, “outside of morality and into metaphysics” (Dworkin 2011: 9).

### 6.3 Further clarifications

It is important to emphasize, before moving on, that Ontological Irrelevance does not require us to **deny** that there are any ethical truths or properties. This is something that has long been emphasized by quasi-realists, but the word ‘quasi-realism’ has, I think, made the point seem more evasive and controversial than it really is. The point is just that claims about ethical truths and properties can be understood in a way that makes them “internal” to ethics, and hence perfectly acceptable by the quietist’s own lights. So, for example, the claim that ethical properties exist out there in the
universe, when read in this “internal” way, is not understood as making a metaphysical
pronouncement about the nature of reality, something that we could understand and debate from a
non-ethical point of view. Rather, it’s an abstract way of expressing a position that we arrive at
and defend from “within” ethical practice, by thinking about, say, whether torture is wrong, and
whether it would be wrong even in a situation where people believed that it was okay. If we can
defend this position about the wrongness of torture on normative grounds – for instance, by saying
that torture is wrong because of the intense suffering it causes, and that it wouldn’t be any less
wrong if we had different beliefs about this, because it would still cause the same amount of
suffering – then we can say (if we want) that ethical properties exist out there in the universe. The
point is just that this doesn’t open up a new topic for serious philosophical investigation. And
similar things could be said for the existence of ethical truths and facts.

An analogy may help here. Suppose Jane said that slavery is wrong, that lying is bad, and
that honesty is good. Did Jane say anything true? Offhand that may not seem like an ethical
question; it seems rather to be a question about what Jane said, and whether any of it was true. But
in order to answer that question, we need to inquire into ethical matters. We need to figure out, for
instance, whether slavery is bad. If it is, then it follows immediately that Jane said something true.
If not – and if the same goes for the other things Jane said – then it follows that Jane didn’t say
anything true. In this way, the question of whether Jane said anything true is (in this context)
“indirectly” ethical. It can be answered decisively by answering the relevant first-order questions
in ethics, given that what Jane said was something ethical. Once you know what Jane said, and
once you’ve answered the relevant ethical questions, you don’t then need to engage in any further
inquiry to determine whether Jane said anything true. A positive answer to that question follows
immediately from a positive answer to the question of whether (for instance) slavery is wrong. Or at least that’s so for a perfectly good sense of ‘true’.

The quietist thinks that we can understand general claims about ethical truths, facts, and properties as working in a similar way. As long as you know what ethical claims are—are—as long as you know that claims about what’s good or bad, right or wrong, and so on are ethical claims, and as long as you understand what these claims mean—then the question of whether there are any ethical truths can be answered decisively by answering questions about, for instance, whether slavery is wrong, or whether killing is bad, or whether honesty is good. Claims about the existence of ethical truths, facts, and properties can thus be understood as a kind of “abstraction” from the substantive positions we adopt when we are engaged in first-order ethical practice. They do not add any real substance to the claims that we make as a part of engaged ethical practice. They may help to clarify or emphasize certain features of our ethical positions, e.g., by allowing us to say that slavery and torture share something in common (namely, the property of being wrong), or by allowing us to say that the wrongness of slavery doesn’t depend on people’s beliefs about it, and so on; but they do not require any substantial philosophical defense beyond the normative defense we are able to provide for our ethical views. Their content is exhausted by the “summarizing” role that they play in abstracting and generalizing over substantive ethical positions, and they don’t introduce a new subject matter that we might inquire into or become puzzled about.

This quietist approach allows us to engage in ethical practice, and to make sense of what we’re doing, without having to ask certain kinds of philosophical questions and without having to engage in certain kinds of philosophical projects. The view allows that certain things really are right or wrong, and hence that there really are ethical properties; it allows that ethical judgments can be true; that there are ethical facts; and so on. But the view explains these claims about
properties and truths in such a way that they don’t call for serious philosophical defense (beyond an explanation of how the claims work, so to speak). Once we’ve defended our ethical beliefs on normative grounds, there’s no more work to do by way of defending the existence of a reality “out there” that our beliefs might be said to represent.

Many philosophers are opposed to this quietist approach because they think that it threatens to undermine the status of our ethical and normative practices in an important way. These philosophers think that, even if there are coherent “internal” readings of claims about ethical properties, truths, and facts like the ones I just described, there are also more substantial, “external” readings of these claims that are important, and that require serious metaphysical theorizing. Let me give a couple examples that nicely illustrate this way of thinking, in order to further clarify what is at stake in deciding whether to embrace the thesis of Ontological Irrelevance.

In his book *Moral Realism*, Russ Shafer-Landau says that moral realists must “take very seriously the challenge of explaining how a sui generis realm of values can subsist in an otherwise scientific world” (Shafer-Landau 2003: 71-2). And he suggests that ethics will have to “go the way of leprechauns and centaurs” unless we can show that values could “plausibly count as occupants of our world” (Shafer-Landau 2003: 3). The quietist refuses to answer these questions, because he thinks they arise from an inflated and misleading understanding of the idea of “moral reality.” There is no challenge of explaining how a sui generis realm of values could subsist in our world, because talk of a “realm” that “subsists” in the world is a misleading and unhelpful metaphor; it says nothing that we could not put more simply by just saying, for instance, that some things are right or wrong and that they would still be right or wrong even if people believed otherwise. It is best to avoid the metaphors altogether, lest they tempt us into thinking that ethics calls for some
kind of extra-scientific investigation into a “shadowy world” that lies just beyond the purview of natural science.⁴

Or consider the following question posed by David Enoch in his book, *Taking Morality Seriously*. He says:

[H]ere, in our world, we have all these words and patterns of use; and all the way out there in Plato’s heaven, there is a plethora of normative (and presumably other) properties and relations. In virtue of what, then, does the word ‘good’ manage to find the property *goodness* and not some other property? (Enoch 2011: 178)

Once again, the quietist will want to say that this sort of question reflects a misleading picture of how ethical thought and talk work. They do not “find properties” that are “all the way out there in Plato’s heaven,” unless this is just a misleading way of saying that they have a distinctive kind of meaning, which is something we can explain in other terms (e.g., by characterizing the practical role that they play in our thought and talk). Once again, the quietist’s strategy is to dissolve the underlying puzzles or concerns that make these questions seem pressing, rather than trying to answer the questions head-on.

Let me now return to the specific quietist thesis that I introduced above, the one which says that ethics doesn’t need a distinctively ontological vindication. I have not yet said much about the idea of “vindicating” ethics, or about what an ontological vindication of ethics might be. But these ideas are not far away from the present discussion. We can bring them into view by considering a common worry about the kind of view I’ve been describing. The worry is that, even if it is possible to give an “internal” and broadly deflationary reading of ontological claims about the existence of ethical properties, truths, facts, and so on, there are also other ways of interpreting these claims. And these other ways are important – the thought goes – because it matters whether our ethical

---

⁴ I take the phrase ‘shadowy world’ from (Scanlon 2014: 24), who uses it to make a similar point.
judgments can be given an “external” ontological vindication, something that goes beyond the kind of vindication we provide when we show that some ethical judgment is justified “from an ethical point of view.”

Here we can recall Shafer-Landau’s remark about ethics having to go the way of leprechauns or centaurs, or David Enoch’s suggestion that if we want to take ethics seriously we cannot settle for a “metaphysically light” form of ethical realism, but must instead “step up to the plate, and defend the rather heavy [ontological] commitments of our realism” (Enoch 2011: 7). These philosophers think, along with many others, that it would be an important blow to our ethical judgments if the only sense in which they could be said to “represent real truths or properties” was the deflationary one I just described. They think that ethical properties have to exist in some more robust sense than this, a sense that would require a substantial philosophical defense in the form of a metaphysical theory about (say) where ethical properties come from, or how they could exist in a world like ours.

That is the idea I mean to be rejecting with my thesis of Ontological Irrelevance.

6.4 Against ontological relevance

Ontological Irrelevance says that ethics does not need an external ontological vindication. The opposing view says the opposite. It says that ethics does need an external ontological vindication. I’ll call this thesis Ontological Relevance. I now want to present an argument against this thesis.

It will help to start by just stating the basic thought behind my resistance to Ontological Relevance. The basic thought is that ethics would still matter, it would still be just as important or legitimate or worth taking seriously, whether or not ethical properties could be said to exist in some robust or “external” sense. Whatever it means to say that ethical properties exist in an
external sense, the fact that ethical properties didn’t exist in that sense could never make it the case that I don’t have a duty to help people in need, or that I have no reason to care about my friends, or anything like that. I should help people in need, and I should care about my friends, whether or not ethical properties can be said to exist in some robust or external sense.

This way of putting the point is not very helpful in the present context, though, and it’s also not entirely fair to my opponents. There are several issues here, but the most important one for our purposes is that philosophers who endorse Ontological Relevance think that claims about whether ethics matters, as well as claims about whether I have duties to help others and so on, are themselves claims about how things are in ethical or normative reality. So there is no way of making the claim that I want to make here, the claim that these things would still matter even if there were no robust ethical reality, that does not already presuppose the falsity of my opponent’s view.

I think this reveals a deep dialectical difficulty about this whole debate. The two sides fundamentally disagree about how to understand the very claims they need to articulate their own positions, and to raise objections to the opposing side. This point applies equally in both directions. The quietist understands ethical claims in a way that does not require them to have an ontological vindication, but in order to defend this view she needs to say things that presuppose the falsity of her opponent’s view. Likewise, though, the proponent of the more “metaphysically inclined” view understands ethical claims in a way that requires them to have an ontological vindication, and in order to defend that view she too has to say things that presuppose the falsity of quietism. So, to give just one example, David Enoch has to assume, in his argument against quietism in *Taking Morality Seriously*, that we would only be justified in “standing our ground” in cases of normative
conflict if there were some external, ontological claim that could explain why this is so; but this is precisely what the quietist denies.\textsuperscript{5}

So I don’t think that either side in this debate can hope to provide a wholly non-question-begging argument against the opposing view. Now, some quietists have resorted to mocking the other side. And some opponents of quietism have done the same. I think a better approach for quietists is to try to take seriously the concerns that lead people into the opposing view, to say how we can address those concerns on our own terms; and also to articulate as best as we can why their view seems problematic, and to say how we can avoid the problems their view runs into. Ideally, we should try to do this in a way that might persuade a neutral third-party to this debate. Obviously I can’t do all of this here, but I will try to do part of it. In particular, what I want to do here is to illustrate a sense in which it seems ethically problematic to think that ethics needs an external ontological vindication, by carefully drawing out what I think are some troubling implications of that view.

So the argument I’m going to sketch will not be an attempt to demonstrate to my opponents that they are wrong by arguing for the truth of my view from premises that they can or must accept. It will instead be an attempt to talk my opponents out of their view, by revealing to them a way in which their own view seems to go against some of their most deeply held ethical convictions. Of course, we’ll then want some way of understanding those convictions that lets us avoid this problem. And that’s where practical cognitivism comes in. That view gives you a way of understanding ethics that is theoretically satisfying while also allowing you to preserve your most deeply held ethical convictions. Or so I want to suggest.

\textsuperscript{5} See (Enoch 2011, Chapter 5).
Let me start with an important observation. We can be appropriate targets of ethical criticism not just in virtue of doing bad things, or in virtue of holding mistaken first-order ethical beliefs, but also in virtue of the way that we are disposed to reason about matters that are of ethical significance. Suppose someone believes that he ought to help the needy, and that he generally acts in accordance with that belief, but suppose that he’s also disposed to change his mind about this if he thinks that doing so would further his political ambitions. That sort of person is clearly an appropriate target of ethical criticism. His dispositions reveal something problematic about the way that he understands and relates to his own ethical commitments.

Now suppose that this politically-motivated reasoner responds to our ethical criticism of him as follows. “I agree that we should help people in need. And I agree that the normative case in favor of this belief is that helping people shows proper respect for them (or something along those lines). But I also think that the authority of ethics as a whole depends on something about my own political ambitions. In particular, I think that ethics would be a sham if it didn’t further my political ambitions. So it makes perfect sense for me to reason in the ways that you find ethically objectionable.”

There are two observations I want to make here. The first is that the fact that this person holds this more general view about the role that political ambition plays in grounding the authority of ethics does not at all detract from the force of our initial ethical criticism of him. Rather, the fact that this person’s beliefs lead him to think that it “makes perfect sense” to reason in this way reveals something problematic about those very beliefs. Someone who holds those beliefs seems to be related to his own ethical commitments in a problematic sort of way.

The second observation is that if this person is fully committed to his views about how the authority of ethics must be grounded in facts about his own political ambitions, we will not be able
to leverage our ethical criticism into a dialectically effective argument against him. If we pointed out that it is ethically objectionable to reason from a conclusion about one’s own political ambitions to, say, the abandonment of one’s ethical beliefs, the person could respond as follows: “But this just presupposes what I deny, namely, that ethical beliefs could have their authority independently of whether they further my political ambitions. It is idle to criticize this view of mine by saying that there would be an ethical objection to giving up my ethical beliefs if I learned that they did not further my political ambitions, because if I learned this it would not make sense for me to take any ethical objections seriously.”

The fact that we could not argue this person out of his ethically defective outlook does not show that there is nothing wrong with his outlook, or that we have no reason to reject it. Nor does it show that it would be “idle” to argue against this outlook by articulating the ethical objection to it. Such an argument might be important for other reasons. For one thing, it might be a way of articulating something that’s true and important, namely, that this person’s views and dispositions are ethically defective. More importantly, though, such an argument might be useful for us when we are thinking abstractly about what kind of philosophical account of ethics we should be aiming for. It might convince us, for instance, that we should try to avoid being committed to these ethically objectionable patterns of reasoning if we can, and that we should try to find a way of understanding ethics that doesn’t require us to endorse these patterns of reasoning.

It is in this spirit that I offer my argument against Ontological Relevance. My aim will be to articulate what I think is a cogent ethical objection to that view, and the objection will be structurally similar to the one I’ve just described.
Perhaps you can already see how that objection will go. In order to lay out the reasoning as clearly as I can, though, I want to start with a more careful description of an example like the politically-motivated reasoner above.

Consider, then, the example of someone whom I’ll call the **Mama-Said-So Realist**. This person’s beliefs and conduct are largely impeccable when they are evaluated from an “ethically engaged” point of view. He believes that kindness is good, that cruelty is bad, and all the rest of it. He is thoughtful and reflective and responsible in his reasoning about what to do and how to live, and he generally does the right thing. Moreover, he also believes the following thesis:

**Mama-Said-So Realism:** Ethics is serious business only if Mama says so; otherwise it’s a sham.

Every morning this person wakes up and asks Mama whether ethics is serious business, and she says, “Yes.” But one morning she says, “No,” and on that day the Mama-Said-So Realist decides to let a child drown while out on his morning stroll. He could have easily saved the child, and doing so would have involved no real risk or sacrifice on his part, but instead he reasoned as follows: “Ethics is a sham, so I might as well let the child drown.”

Now we can all agree, I hope, that there is something ethically bad about the Mama-Said-So Realist. In fact, I think we can distinguish two dimensions along which this sort of person seems to be an appropriate target of ethical criticism. The first dimension pertains quite directly to the person’s bad deeds. It’s bad to let a child drown in this way, and the Mama-Said-So Realist is an appropriate target of ethical criticism for doing that.
In addition to this behavior-oriented dimension of criticism, there also seems to be a further, outlook-oriented dimension of criticism to which the Mama-Said-So Realist is open. This dimension of criticism pertains less to the Mama-Said-So Realist’s outward, immoral behavior, and more to the way in which he understands and relates to his ethical commitments. Intuitively, we want to say that there’s something wrong with the Mama-Said-So Realist even before he goes out and lets a child drown. It is tempting here to say that, although this person may have the right first-order ethical beliefs, somehow he doesn’t seem to have them for the right reasons, or at least he doesn’t seem to hold them in the right sort of way. The Mama-Said-So Realist is open to this sort of criticism even before he learns that Mama doesn’t say so. He is an appropriate target of ethical criticism not only for the bad things that he does when he learns that Mama doesn’t say so, but also for the tenuous and arbitrary nature of his ethical commitments. Such a person fails to take ethics seriously in an important sense, and he is an appropriate target of ethical criticism for that reason.

The fact that the Mama-Said-So Realist is disposed to reason in this way – from a conclusion about what Mama says to the belief that ethics is a sham, and then from there to the decision to let the child drown – and in particular the fact he thinks there is absolutely nothing wrong with reasoning in this way, reveals a kind of defect in his general outlook. It is easiest to appreciate the character of this defect if we vividly imagine from the inside what it would be like to change one’s mind in this sort of way. Imagine seeing a drowning child and thinking “He’s going to drown; I’ve got to help!” Imagine holding that normative thought clearly in view, and then acquiring the information that Mama doesn’t say so, and then saying, “Ah, never mind about that. I don’t have to help.” To change your mind in this way would involve a failure to be
appropriately attuned to the ethical considerations that are at play in this sort of case – for instance, the consideration that a child is drowning nearby and you’re the only one that can help.

This sort of case is importantly different in kind from a case where someone changes his mind about whether to save the drowning child in a way that displays a sensitivity to other ethically relevant considerations that he takes to be at play. If someone saw the drowning child and initially thought that he should help, but then realized that if he did this he would be (say) violating an important duty to someone else (to his own child, say), he might then change his mind about whether to save the drowning child. He may be right or wrong about that – that depends on the details of the case, and on whether a normative case can be made in favor of the claim that in these particular circumstances one need not save the drowning child – but the important point is that this sort of case is different in kind from the Mama-Said-So Realist one. What we are imagining here is a case where someone changes his mind about whether to save the child because of his sensitivity to other ethically significant considerations. In the Mama-Said-So Realist case, by contrast, the person’s change of mind is not based on any kind of ethical sensitivity; it is not because he thinks there are other ethical considerations at play that he changes his mind about whether to save the child, but because he thinks that ethics is serious business only if Mama says so, and because he comes to believe that Mama doesn’t say so. And that reveals a kind of defect in the way that this person relates to the relevant ethical considerations. It reveals that he has a corrupt or defective ethical outlook.

I want to take a moment to pin down that last point more precisely, since I eventually want to say that Ontological Relevance is ethically objectionable in just the same way that Mama-Said-So Realism is. We can do this by thinking about the place that a person’s ethical commitments occupy within what we might call her total outlook. Think of a person’s total outlook as something
like the collection of all of her beliefs and commitments. In general, when a person takes in new information, she revises her total outlook by forming new beliefs or commitments, abandoning or suspending old ones, and so on. (That’s simplistic, but you get the idea.) Some ways of doing this will be rational or irrational, in a purely “subjective” sense, in light of one’s total outlook. For example, if my total outlook includes a belief that lying is wrong, and I take in new information to the effect that you have told a lie, then (plausibly) it would be rational for me to form the belief that you have done something wrong.

The “place” that a person’s ethical commitments occupy within her total outlook is a matter of what her outlook renders rational or irrational, with respect to those commitments, upon taking in certain kinds of information. For example, the Mama-Said-So Realist’s total outlook renders it rational to give up the belief that it’s wrong to let a child drown upon taking in the information that Mama doesn’t say so. Similarly, his total outlook also renders rational – or at least fails to render irrational – his decision to let the child drown while out on his morning stroll.

There are various ways in which a person’s outlook might be ethically defective. One straightforward way is simply for the person to have the wrong first-order ethical beliefs. But the Mama-Said-So Realist illustrates another, more general way in which a person’s outlook might be ethically defective. Her outlook might assign the wrong place to her ethical commitments. This kind of defect will be reflected in the patterns of reasoning that one’s outlook endorses or recommends. For example, the Mama-Said-So Realist’s total outlook endorses reasoning from the claim that Mama doesn’t say so, to the claim that ethics is a sham, and then from there to the decision to let a child drown. This is a bad pattern of reasoning, and someone who reasons in this way displays a lack of proper concern for the drowning child. From the Mama-Said-So Realist’s
point of view, though, there is absolutely nothing wrong with reasoning in this way; it makes perfect sense. And that reveals a kind of defect in his total outlook.

The general thought at work behind this criticism of Mama-Said-So Realism can be put roughly like this. Some beliefs are subject to ethical evaluation because they function as commitment-oriented principles, or principles that link a person’s beliefs about non-ethical matters to her ethical commitments. In particular, a person’s commitment-oriented principles determine how she understands and relates to her own ethical commitments, upon taking in certain kinds of information. (For instance, they determine whether someone thinks her commitments have been undermined upon taking in information about what Mama says.) Some ways of revising our ethical commitments are ethically objectionable. And because of that, some commitment-oriented principles are also ethically objectionable. Roughly, such principles are ethically objectionable if they tell you to revise your commitments in ethically objectionable ways.

The general principle at work here can be summarized as follows:

General Principle: Suppose it’s ethically objectionable to revise one’s ethical commitments in way W in light of information I. Suppose also that outlook O endorses reasoning in way W, and that it does this precisely because it contains the commitment-oriented belief that p. (Roughly: The belief that p is what makes the person think, “It’s okay to reason like that.”) And suppose further that there is a coherent, ethically sound outlook, O*, which is like O in all relevant respects except that (i) it doesn’t contain the belief that p, and (ii) it doesn’t endorse reasoning in way W. Then the belief that p is ethically objectionable. It’s a belief that is such that, when you add it to an outlook that is otherwise ethically sound, the outlook thereby becomes ethically defective.
This captures the general structure of the Mama-Said-So Realist case. The problem with the Mama-Said-So Realist’s total outlook derives precisely from his belief in Mama-Said-So Realism. If we just removed that belief from his total outlook, he’d be fine. But because he holds that belief, his total outlook is ethically defective; it assigns the wrong place to his ethical commitments, and it does so precisely because of his belief in Mama-Said-So Realism.

Now, I want to suggest that Ontological Relevance is ethically objectionable in just the same way as Mama-Said-So Realism. I’ll begin with a highly artificial case, but I want to emphasize upfront that this simple case is meant to illustrate a very general point, and that much of the force of the argument will consist in seeing why all of the natural ways of responding to the simple case turn out to be unavailable to someone who endorses Ontological Relevance.

Let us imagine, then, someone whom I’ll call the Robust-Property Realist. Again, this person’s beliefs and conduct are largely impeccable when they are evaluated from an “ethically engaged” point of view. Moreover, he also believes the following thesis:

Robust-Property Realism: Ethics is serious business only if ethical properties exist in a robust sense; otherwise it’s a sham.

One day a trusted band of philosophers comes along and informs him that the ontologists have just made a shocking discovery: all that really exists, it turns out, are the entities and properties of fundamental physics. There are no ethical properties, no obligations, no duties – none of it. Just physical stuff. (To be fair, we can suppose that the philosophers are also kind enough to share with him the arguments that convinced them of this shocking conclusion.) And on that day the Robust-
Property Realist decides to let a child drown while out on his morning stroll. He could have easily saved the child with no real risk or sacrifice on his part, but instead he reasoned as follows: “Ethics is a sham, so I might as well let the child drown.”

I think the Robust-Property Realist is open to the same kind of outlook-oriented criticism as the Mama-Said-So Realist; his total outlook is ethically defective in just the same way. To see what’s wrong with the Robust-Property Realist’s outlook, it is helpful to bear in mind that whatever the arguments were that convinced him that ethics is a sham, they could not have been ethical arguments. Remember that this person starts off with ethical beliefs and convictions that are irreproachable from an ethical point of view. But because he believes in Robust-Property Realism, he also thinks that his beliefs and convictions cannot stand on their own. The conclusions he reaches within ethical reflection are legitimate, he thinks, only if ethical properties really exist in some robust sense. This in effect ensures that all of the relevant ethical considerations that might be at play in this sort of case have already been accounted for, as it were, in advance.

So we need to imagine this person taking in some abstract, ethically neutral arguments about such things as the nature of reality, or the nature of existential quantification, or the nature of truth and reference, and thinking to himself, “Hmm, I guess it’s just not true that ethical properties exist. I had always assumed that they did, but it turns out I was wrong about that. Well then, I guess it doesn’t matter whether I let this child drown. So I’ll just let her drown.” And then he goes on to do precisely that.

This, I submit, is an ethically objectionable pattern of reasoning, and someone who reasons in this way is thereby an appropriate target of ethical criticism. Someone who is prepared to abandon her ethical commitments upon taking in abstract arguments in “normatively neutral metaphysics” fails to take her ethical commitments seriously. From the Robust-Property Realist’s
point of view, though, there is absolutely nothing wrong with reasoning in this way. And this reveals a defect in his total outlook.

Applying the General Principle from above to the present case, we get the result that Robust-Property Realism is ethically objectionable. It is the sort of view that is such that, when you add it to a person’s total outlook, her outlook thereby becomes ethically defective. If we just removed that belief from this person’s total outlook, he’d be fine. But precisely because he holds that belief, his ethical commitments fail to occupy the right sort of place within his more general outlook.

Let me now briefly consider some natural ways of responding to this simple case, and in the course of doing that I’ll try to convince you that the problem here is perfectly general – that it will arise in one form or another for anyone who denies my form of quietism.

I’ll start by considering a simple response, in order to generalize the case. You might want to deny that it would be rational for the person in my example to believe that ethics is a sham. Perhaps this person shouldn’t form beliefs about such weighty matters on such a flimsy basis. Perhaps he should doubt his evidence, or engage in some further investigation.

Fair enough, but then I’ll just describe the case differently. What’s crucial in my example is just that the person starts off being ethically good, and that he comes to acquire some evidence in virtue of which he concludes that ethical properties do not really exist, and that none of this involves internal ethical reasoning on his part. And the proponent of Ontological Relevance must allow that there are some evidential circumstances in which this would be the rational thing to conclude. After all, the whole idea behind his opposition to quietism is that we can’t be entirely certain about whether ethical properties really exist on the basis of ethical thinking alone – before the metaphysical arguments are in, so to speak. That’s why it’s supposed to be an important
question whether there really are such properties, and why the claim that there are such properties is supposed to stand in need of a substantial philosophical defense that takes us outside of ethics and into metaphysics. And that is enough to create space for the kind of argument I’m advancing here. So long as the kind of inquiry this person is engaging in is non-ethical, the fact that he thinks there would be absolutely nothing wrong with abandoning his ethical commitments as a result of that inquiry reveals something problematic about the way he understands and relates to those commitments.

Another response would be to insist that there are important differences between the Mama-Said-So Realist case and the Robust-Property Realist case that undermine the force of the objection. The thought here might go like this. Mama-Said-So Realism is objectionable because it makes the status of ethics depend on something wholly arbitrary (namely, whether Mama says so). But whether ethical properties exist is not at all arbitrary in this way. When we engage in ethical practice, we presuppose that ethical properties really exist. We couldn’t coherently deny that ethical properties exist and still go on making ethical judgments and taking them seriously in all of the ways that we ordinarily do.

My reply is that ethical practice presupposes the existence of ethical properties only in the minimal, “shadows-of-predicates” sense allowed by the quietist. It’s true that it would be incoherent to make ethical judgments while denying that ethical properties exist, if the claim that ethical properties exist is just (roughly) a way of summarizing the thought that some things are right or wrong, good or bad, and so on. What the proponent of Ontological Relevance needs is not this trivial claim, but the stronger and more controversial claim that we could not coherently engage in ethical practice while denying that ethical properties exist in some robust, “external” sense. And that seems decidedly less plausible. Claims about whether ethical properties exist
“robustly” are substantial bits of philosophical theory, and there are alternative theories out there, such as practical cognitivism, whose aim is precisely to explain ethical thinking in a way that does not commit us to claims about the robust existence of ethical properties. It seems to me unlikely that all such views are incoherent. And it’s worth noting that proponents of Ontological Relevance do not typically object to these views on the grounds that they are incoherent. Their main objection is not that such views are incoherent, but that they threaten to undermine ethics. And that’s precisely the issue that’s being called into question, here.

Another response is to deny the connection between Robust-Property Realism and the problematic patterns of reasoning described in my example. One way to do this would be to insist on a more nuanced position, according to which we should accept Robust-Properties Realism right now, given our current evidence, but we should give up that commitment if we acquire strong evidence to the effect that there are no ethical properties.

The problem is that this more nuanced position is incoherent. Notice, to begin with, that the view seems to sit rather uneasily with the spirit of Ontological Relevance – with the idea that ethics needs an external ontological vindication. It is as though one said: robust ethical properties are needed if we can get them, but if we can’t get them then we don’t really need them.

An analogy will help to bring out what’s problematic about this suggestion. Suppose that I really want to go to some party, but I think that in order to go I must have an invitation. And suppose that I also (purport to) believe the following: if I acquire strong evidence suggesting that I won’t be getting an invitation, then it’s okay for me to go to the party without one. This does not seem to be a coherent state of mind. On the one hand, if I really do believe that it’s okay for me

---

6 It's important to distinguish this state of mind from a perfectly sensible alternative. I could of course think that I must have an invitation in order to go to the party, if there are any invitations (i.e., if it's the sort of party to which one must be invited), while also thinking that if there aren't any invitations (i.e., if it's not that sort of party) then it's okay for me to go without one. But the analogous claim in the ethical case would not be a version of Ontological Relevance; it
to go to the party without an invitation if my evidence suggests that I won’t be getting one, then I couldn’t really believe that I must have an invitation in order to go. On the other hand, if I really do believe that I must have an invitation to go to the party, I couldn’t really believe that it would be okay for me to go without one, so long as my evidence suggests I won’t be getting one. The same thing goes, I think, for the more nuanced version of Robust-Property Realism being considered here. On the one hand, if you really believe that ethics could be serious business without robust ethical properties if our evidence suggests that there are no such properties, then you couldn’t really believe that such properties are needed in order for ethics to be serious business. And, on the other hand, if you really believe that robust ethical properties are needed in order for ethics to be serious business, then you couldn’t really believe that ethics could be serious business without such properties, so long as our evidence suggests that no such properties exist.

The question then is whether there’s some other way of understanding Ontological Relevance that doesn’t commit you to the ethically problematic patterns of reasoning described in my example. Now, the person in that example comes to think that, because ethics has no external ontological vindication, his ethical commitments are not worth taking seriously, in the sense that it would be “okay” to abandon them, or at least to avoid letting them play any role in his deliberations about what to do. And it’s worth noting that opponents of quietism typically state their view in ways that suggest a commitment to this very idea. In response to Dworkin’s arguments against the intelligibility of “external skepticism,” for example, Michael Smith says that it is perfectly coherent for someone to believe that “the world contains no moral features at all,” and that if we come to believe this then “we have to decide which claims we should give up, and

would just be the trivial claim that we need external ethical properties if ethics is the sort of thing that needs them, but we don't need them if ethics isn't that sort of thing.
the answer is that we should give up the moral claims” (Smith 2010: 513). In a paper called “Archimedeanism and Why Metaethics Matters,” Paul Bloomfield sets out to demonstrate, against quietists, that there are perfectly intelligible questions about moral ontology that are not themselves internal to moral practice, and then he says that “determining what the true ontology is for morality” is important, because “not everything is equally worth killing or dying for” (Bloomfield 2009: 301). David Enoch says that quietist views fail to secure the right kind of objectivity for our ethical practices, and he characterizes objectivity in explicitly normative terms; his charge amounts to the claim that if quietist views were true, it would be okay to flip a coin when deciding how to resolve ethically charged cases of practical conflict (e.g., in a case where you think we should take the stray dog we’ve just found to the vet and I think we should torture it). Sarah McGrath says, in a paper called “Why Moral Realism Won’t Come for Cheap,” that if certain kinds of external skepticism are true, “the rational thing … to do … would be to abandon [your ethical] belief[s],” and that if you can’t bring yourself to do that “you should regard your inability to do so as a failure of rationality, and not make use of the belief[s] in your practical or theoretical reasoning” (McGrath 2014: 209). There are countless other examples like this where philosophers try to illustrate the importance of the sorts of questions the quietist dismisses by demonstrating their importance for how we should behave or deliberate. It is this kind of importance that I assume in setting up my argument and then call into question by walking through my example.

It's important to note that the basic problem here can’t be avoided by just “toning down” the response – e.g., by saying that, although the person in my example shouldn’t abandon his ethical commitments, he ought to hold them with less conviction, or he ought not to give them the same amount of weight, or something like that. To revise one’s ethical commitments in this manner
would still be ethically problematic in the same sort of way. The child who is about to drown over there is still just as much in need of his help. Why should he give any less weight to that fact?

If the proponent of Ontological Relevance wants to agree with me about all of this, not just for considerations about whether to save drowning children but for all other ethically significant considerations that might be at play in cases where we have to make up our minds about what to do, then I find it hard to know what to make of her claim that ethics needs an external ontological vindication. If you think we should take ethics seriously in all of the ways that we ordinarily do, that we should go on deliberating and making all of our decisions in just the same way regardless of whether ethical properties or truths can be said to exist in some “external” sense, then it seems to me that you have already accepted the thesis of Ontological Irrelevance. You might as well embrace that thesis and find a way of understanding ethics that lets you make sense of it.

The basic issue here can be put like this. The proponent of Ontological Relevance has to allow that there is some respect in which it would be okay to change the way that one deliberates and decides about matters of ethical significance on the basis of external arguments like the ones in my imagined example. That much seems to be required just to give content to the idea that ethics would be undermined if we could not give it an external ontological vindication. But anyone who thinks this is going to be subject to the same kind of objection that I tried to bring out in my example. To avoid that problem, he’s going to have to insist that our views about whether ethics has been undermined, or whether our ethical judgments are all fundamentally mistaken, have absolutely no bearing on our ethical practices, and that they have absolutely nothing to do with questions about what to do and how to deliberate. But that seems to deprive the notions of undermining and mistake of any real interest or significance.
There is, as I’ve already mentioned, a dialectical issue with the argument I’ve been trying to make here. It appeals to our own ethical convictions about how to reason in cases like the one I described, but those are cases in which the person who has to make a decision thinks that his own ethical commitments have been undermined. So I couldn’t hope to convince him with my argument. But I am not trying to convince him. I am trying to convince you, in the circumstances we are in right now, where we are thinking about what sort of philosophical account of ethics is needed in order for us to take ethics seriously. I take it we can all agree that, given the option between giving up on our ethical commitments in circumstances like the ones I’ve described, and coming up with a with a quietist-friendly account that lets us preserve those commitments, we ought to go for the latter. And the primary reasons for thinking this are ethical ones – they stem precisely from concerns about taking ethics seriously. I presume that you share these concerns, and that you share my ethical verdict about what we should do in cases like the one I’ve described; and I’ve tried to bring this out by appealing to your ethical sensibility. If I’m right about this, I conclude that you are already, at bottom, a quietist. You don’t really think that ethics needs the support of external ontological claims about the robust existence of ethical properties, truths, or facts. You are prepared to take ethics seriously even in cases where the ontological evidence suggests that it has no such external support – at least if there’s a coherent and intellectually responsible way of understanding what you’re doing when you do this.

I thus invite you to give up the view that ethics would be undermined if it had no external ontological support, and to give up whatever philosophical conception of ethics might lead you to hold that view. Instead, you should try to find a way of understanding ethics that does not leave your ethical commitments vulnerable to this kind of external undermining. You should do this because the alternative conflicts with your deep commitment to taking ethics seriously, and
because there is a perfectly coherent view you can put in its place that does not conflict with that commitment. You should give up your commitment to Ontological Relevance because you are a good person, and because you don’t want to be like the Mama-Said-So Realist. Step back from the ledge, then, and embrace your inner quietist.

Of course, if you do that, you’ll need a metaethical theory that can make sense of ethical practice as the sort of thing that doesn’t need an external ontological vindication. And that’s just what practical cognitivism does. It gives us a philosophical understanding of ethics that vindicates Ontological Irrelevance. The argument I’ve presented here thus provides indirect support for practical cognitivism, in two ways. First, it takes us through a line of reasoning that, if successful, reveals to us that practical cognitivism is – at least in the abstract – exactly the sort of metaethical theory we ought to be looking for, if we want to preserve our deepest ethical commitments. And second, it helps to undermine one major source of resistance to that view. You shouldn’t find practical cognitivism objectionable because it fails to provide a distinctively ontological vindication for our ethical practices. Ethics does not need a distinctively ontological vindication.

6.5 Concluding remarks

All of this leaves open a range of important questions about what an internal, non-ontological vindication of ethics might look like. I think there is room for debate here, even among those who endorse practical cognitivism. Some philosophers whom I would like to include as fellow practical cognitivists – for instance, C. L. Stevenson and Simon Blackburn – seem to think that we should avoid any attempt to formulate general principles about how to approach practical questions. Stevens summarizes this thought by saying that “living questions are too rich in their complexity to be answered by a formula” (Stevenson 1944: 336). Compare Blackburn’s remark that “[s]ystematization should stop in theory just as it does in proper living” (Blackburn 1998: 310).
Others – such as R. M. Hare and Christine Korsgaard, and to some extent Allan Gibbard – think that we can take a more systematic approach.\(^8\) I myself fall somewhere in the middle. I believe that we can make some progress here by articulating a conception of practical rationality as the capacity for thinking in ways that facilitate a sound practical understanding of how to live, and that we can get some grip on what is involved in such understanding by looking at exemplars (i.e., by looking at people who have practical wisdom, and thinking about the habits of mind that such people exemplify in their practical thinking). But here as elsewhere we will have to work up from our current sense of what counts as good practical thinking. We have no other way of identifying exemplars, or determining what counts as sound practical understanding, except by engaging our own ethical sensibilities and practical outlooks. Still, thinking about exemplars can help us to think about which sensibilities and emotional responses to cultivate or endorse, and which ones to uproot or oppose. It can thus help to combat some of the vices of practical thinking to which we are naturally prone, thereby guiding us toward a more stable and refined understanding of how to live.

Of course, in saying that we should cultivate or endorse some emotional responses and uproot or oppose others, I am making a normative claim. But that is the only thing I can do, here. If you disagree, you can air your disagreement, and I can think about how to respond. You can respond in turn, and then you and I will be thinking practically together about how to think practically. Practical cognitivism does not dictate how such thinking should proceed; it merely provides an interpretation of what such thinking consists in. It tells us that such thinking is irreducibly practical – an attempt to figure out what to do and how to live, rather than an attempt to figure out how things are in ethical reality. This interpretation cannot settle our practical questions for us, but it can help to shape the way we approach such questions.

\(^8\) See, e.g., (Hare 1981), (Korsgaard 2009), and (Gibbard 2008).
Bibliography


Bratman, Michael. 1996. “Identification, Decision, and Treating as a Reason.” *Philosophical*
Topics 24 (2): 1–18.


———. 2015b. “Can Reasons Fundamentalism Answer the Normative Question?” In


——. 2003. “Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy.” Edited by


———. 1986. *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford University Press, USA.


