How Much Realism?
Evolved Thinkers and Normative Concepts¹

Allan Gibbard
Department of Philosophy
University of Michigan

In the world as we should think it to be, where does ethics fit? The problem is familiar enough: Science pictures our species as the upshot of a long history of natural selection. What any of us does stems from nature and nurture, from our genetic plans, as it were, and social influences of family, teachers, and peers, along with such factors as uterine environment and parasites. Can we coherently accept an account of our nature along causal lines like these and still regard ourselves as capable of moral thinking and well-founded moral judgment. It is wrong, we are convinced, to torment a person for fun; indeed we take this to be an obvious truism. What does thinking such a thing consist in, and how can we know even something this obvious?

I won’t be discussing how evolutionary theory might help explain our proclivities to moral judgment, although that is a fascinating and important question, and there is a great deal of work on it that well deserves discussion. Rather, I’ll suppose that evolution, social history, and the like explain causally what we are like, and then ask the philosophical question of whether and how the states that figure in such explanation might qualify as cogent moral thinking. Notoriously, some of the prime accounts of moral wrongness leave it mysterious how we could know about it. Wrongness, we are told, is a property that some acts have, but not the kind of property that we can investigate by ordinary scientific methods, and not the causal kind of property that figures in scientific explanations. Perhaps there’s an answer to how we could learn about such a property—many philosophers think that there is—but we do very much need such an explanation.

Expressivism and Non-naturalism

I’ll start with two standard positions, without worrying at the outset whether their delineations are too neat. Expressivists and non-naturalists alike reject analytical naturalism, the view that

¹ Parts of this paper are adapted from my Lindley Lecture at the University of Kansas, 2009, “Evolving Moral Knowledge”, which is being published as a pamphlet.
ethical claims can be put in terms fit to incorporate into empirical sciences like psychology. The claim “I must go,” for instance, isn’t the psychological claim that I plan to go, since you could agree that I plan to go but reject my protestation that I must go.

Ethical claims, I’ll take it along with many other philosophers, are part of a larger category of claims we call normative. These include, for example, the claims of normative epistemology, which asks what beliefs are warranted. The realm of the normative, we can say, is the “oughty”, or as Wilfrid Sellars put it, whatever is “fraught with ought”. We might say that the basic normative concept is that of a reason, in the sense of a reason to do such-and-such or to believe such-and-such.\(^2\) Or we might think that the basic concept is that of an act, belief, or the like as warranted or something one ought to do or believe.\(^3\) Reasons, warrant, and oughts may be interdefinable, and I’ll help myself to all these terms.

Begin with non-naturalism, then. Non-naturalists say that warrant is a non-natural property. Nothing further can be said; the property is simple in the sense of having no components. Or alternatively, I have proposed, a better kind of non-naturalist could say that the concept Warrant is primitive, and can’t be explained further.\(^4\) Many of us find non-naturalism baffling. I do take myself to understand talk of warrant and of reasons to do a thing or believe things. I am puzzled, though, why I should think that the universe contains properties that are non-natural, or how a primitive, non-naturalistic concept could be a legitimate part of our thinking. How could I have learned of a non-naturalistic subject matter?

My own, expressivist answer goes in a nutshell like this: Pretty much everything non-naturalists say in elucidating their position is right, properly understood. Still, there is more to be had by way of explanation than non-naturalists typically give. The key to our ability to wield non-naturalistic concepts is that these concepts are directive. Their role is to figure in action and the like. Since we evolved to act and to be intelligent about it, we evolved to have directive concepts. The prime biological function of these concepts is to figure in thinking what to do.

In my 2003 book *Thinking How to Live*, I began with the slogan that oughts or musts are plans. Believing I must leave at noon on Saturday amounts to planning to leave then. This can at best be rough, however. Aren’t beliefs, after all, quite different from plans? Also, not all normative beliefs are as straightforwardly tied to plans as is the belief that I must leave now. Take for instance, the claim, “Either it’s not yet noon or I must leave now”. To believe this isn’t necessarily to plan to leave now. My slogan that musts are plans at the very least needs modification.

---

2 Scanlon is a prime proponent; see *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998).


4 See Scanlon, *What We Owe* (1998), p. 17. I use small caps to denote concepts, and bold italics to denote properties.
Here is a second and much better approximation: Normative beliefs are restrictions. Take again the claim that either it’s not yet noon or I must leave now. To believe this is to rule out a combination of states of mind: I rule out the combination, disbelieving that it’s not yet noon and rejecting planning to leave now. More generally, a normative belief restricts one to certain combinations of naturalistic belief and plan. This second approximation is what I’ll be discussing—though I’ll introduce some further refinements in the course of my discussion.

I must stress at the outset that I am using the term ‘plan’ differently from the way we ordinarily do. This is something I didn’t sufficiently elucidate in my 2003 book. In the ordinary sense, I’m not planning something unless I believe that, when the time comes, I’ll do it, in part because I now settle on doing it. This doesn’t hold for “plans” as I appropriate the word.

I have been most puzzled about the tie of a “plan”, in my sense, to action. One thing I have said about this I would now like not to maintain. The proof of the plan is in the execution, I have thought. Suppose I restrict my plans to ones that include leaving for home at noon on Saturday. Then as long as I stick to this restriction, when I think the time has arrived, I’ll leave. The objection to this is that it doesn’t allow for weakness of will. In Wise Choices in 1990, I allowed weakness of will as something in need of explanation. I speculated that we have a “normative control system” as part of our psychic makeup, but that it can be overwhelmed by appetite, embarrassment, dread, and the like. This fits more recent work in empirical psychology that supports what’s called “dual process theory”. Without technical jargon, we can say this: Planning in my sense works in a characteristic way. We contemplate a situation we aren’t in but might be in, think what to do in it, and then when the time comes, often do just that. Plans, we can say, are deliverances of this apparatus. Another feature of our psychic makeup is reasoning, and we can regiment what’s involved as restricting our plans and naturalistic beliefs in certain ways. The restrictions I’m talking about are deliverances of these systems, which we characterize by their typical functioning. This account will allow that I can act in violation of a restriction that I accept.

The clear distinctive feature of normative concepts, I now think, lies in their conceptual ties to action. Take, for example, the belief that the building is on fire and the one and only way to keep from being burned to a crisp is to leave forthwith. If that’s the case, we’d better leave forthwith, but it isn’t strictly incoherent, conceptually, to have this belief and not to leave. Contrast this with the normative belief that one must leave forthwith. It is, I maintain, conceptually incoherent to hold this belief and not leave, if one can.

Cultural Differences and Mind-Independence

My teacher Richard Brandt, in the late 1940’s, made visits to a Hopi Indian reservation to conduct an ethnographic study of the ethical thinking of traditional Hopi. A central question he

---

5 On dual process theory, one might see, for example, Kahneman, “Maps of Bounded Rationality”, and Chaiken and Trope, *Dual Process Theories* (1999).
investigated was whether any ethical differences between Hopi and Euro-American thinking were fundamental, rather than being grounded in differences in beliefs concerning non-ethical facts. He found almost none, but he did find one candidate he couldn’t eliminate. As young men, some Hopi had joined in a game we might call chicken pull, which they enjoyed. A chicken would be buried up to its neck in the ground, and players would then ride by on their horses and see who could pull the chicken out of the ground by its neck. For the most part, these Hopi subjects saw nothing wrong with this game. Brandt probed for whether differing non-ethical beliefs might ground these different ethical judgments, asking them such things as whether the chicken felt pain, and they answered that it did, that a chicken feel pain in the same way we do. So the Hopi believed the non-normative things that Brandt’s own community was convinced make such games morally wrong. But—apart from the influence of a Protestant missionary some time ago—they didn’t think cruelty to animals in any way wrong.6

The facts that Brandt reports are more complex than my summary. I’ll speak, though, of “Brandt’s Hopi”, and just stipulate that whatever the actual facts, these are hypothetical people who fit the picture I just sketched of Hopi young men of a century ago. We can take it, then, that if you or I had been brought up like Brandt’s Hopi, we too would have seen nothing wrong with a game that hurts a chicken.

I myself am convinced that the fact that the game causes the chicken severe pain is weighty reason not to play it, enjoyable though the game was for the players. That the game hurts the chicken is reason not to play it not only for people in my own community, but if one is one of Brandt’s Hopi who sees nothing wrong with the game and lives in a community that sees nothing wrong with it. Here I am talking about reasons in the normative sense, considerations that count in favor or against. This conviction of mine, on my view, amounts to a plan for how to weigh considerations for the case of being one of Brandt’s Hopi.

What, then, are we to make of this difference in ethical thinking? It is hard to see why Brandt’s Hopi should be worse judges of the matter than we are, except on question-begging grounds. Can we claim our belief to be well founded when their disbelief seems to have as much basis as our belief? Considerations like these convince some philosophers that all reasons must somehow be mind-dependent. Mind-dependence theses come in various versions, but the version I’ll be considering is one of agent mind-dependence. This is the thesis that all reasons to do things or not depend, ultimately, on the motives of those whose reasons they are. Reasons to spare a chicken suffering, in the case of Brandt’s Hopi, must depend on the Hopis’ own sensibilities, their motives, feelings, and judgments. Of course for many reasons to do things, any reasonable person will think this, but the agent mind-dependence thesis is that all reasons work this way: there can’t be reasons to act that don’t somehow depend on the sensibility of the person acting.

Moral realists, though, as I’ll be using the term, don’t accept this mind-dependence thesis. Many will insist that how the chicken experiences pain may provide a reason not to torment it independently of whether anyone cares. My own, expressivist view allows this as at least intelligible. According to my own metanormative view, to think whether, in the case of Brandt’s Hopi, there is reason not to hurt chickens is to ask how to weigh the considerations, such as one’s own fun and comradeship and the chicken’s pain, for the case of being one of Brandt’s Hopi. My answer may be, among other things, to weigh the chicken’s pain against playing or promoting the game. Planning this way amounts, I maintain, to holding that the chicken’s pain is reason not to play the game regardless of whether anyone opposes it.

I agree, of course, that many reasons are grounded in features of the agent’s mind. Such factors as the cultural significance of a practice as the agent feels it may well make for weighty reasons. My account of the concept REASON doesn’t say whether all reasons are of this sort, but it allows that we can deny that they are and be intelligible. When it comes to inflicting pain on a chicken for fun, I myself hold, moreover, that if chickens experience pain in the same way we do, then the chicken’s pain gives anyone reason not to hurt it, independently of his views on the matter.

I am discussing two distinguishable issues. One is what normative claims mean, or the nature of normative concepts. As I have sketched, the non-naturalist thinks that normative concepts are distinct from the naturalistic concepts that figure in science, and that basic ones can’t be further explained. Expressivists think that normative concepts can be explained obliquely, by saying what kinds of states of mind they figures in. I myself think that the basic normative concept WARRANT can be explained in terms of “planning”. The other issue concerns a kind of mind-independence: whether some reasons to do things obtain independently of the proclivities of the agent. As part of my theory of the nature of normative concepts, I maintain that it is coherent, conceptually, to think that some reasons are mind-independent in this way. I also hold the normative view that some reasons indeed are like this. Expressivism and this substantive normative view are chief elements in what I’ll follow Sharon Street in calling “quasi-realism”. This is the view that a core of ordinary normative views, including this mind-independence thesis, are true and are to be interpreted expressivistically. Full normative realism is the view that such a core of ordinary views is true, and is to be interpreted non-naturalistically.

Wrong-Making and Justification
If we had all been raised like Brandt’s Hopi, we wouldn’t find their game wrong. I’m saying, however, that it indeed is wrong to take no heed of the chicken’s pain in deciding what to do. How can I square all this? We need, I think, to distinguish two questions. First, what features make an act right or wrong? Second, what justifies a judgment that it is right or wrong? What makes the game of chicken-pull wrong, I say, is that it greatly hurts the chicken. That makes it wrong, whether one is a Euro-American who, along with the rest of his community, finds it wrong, or one of Brandt’s Hopi, who, together with the rest of his community, finds nothing
wrong with it. And what makes it wrong, other things equal, to inflict pain on a chicken? Nothing further, I say, than what it’s like to be a chicken in pain.

What justifies me in thinking this, however, does depend on me. It has to be something about me and my sense of plausibility. Some things I find plausible and some I don’t. What I find plausible is a contingent fact about me. It’s not a quirk; it results from my species design, as it were, along with my social background. How all this works is ill understood, but the point is, the upshot might conceivably have been otherwise. And if Brandt’s conclusions were correct, it indeed would have been otherwise if I had been raised like the Hopi he studied. In coming to a conclusion on a question like this, I have no choice but to rely, at some crucial junctures, on my sense of plausibility, and if my sense of plausibility had been different, I would have been justified, epistemically, in coming to different conclusions. Those raised like Brandt’s Hopi react to things as implausible that I find plausible, and so are justified epistemically in coming to the wrong conclusion.

Still, the case Brandt’s Hopi raises a puzzle for moral realists who rely on their sense of what’s plausible. Suppose we are investigating a matter of ordinary natural fact, such as the frequency of disease in a population. If our method of investigation isn’t one that will somehow “track” the facts of the matter, it isn’t to be relied on. Suppose two equally well credentialed doctors regard each other as fools, I have no reason to trust one above the other, and each, I know, would tell me something different. I then have no reason to believe the one I happen to consult, as opposed to the other. If there’s a fact as to whether animal pain is worth avoiding, and if we and Brandt’s Hopi are equally reliable indicators of that fact, there may be no more reason for me to rely on my own judgment than to rely on the judgment of one of them.

One version of such worries is argued by Sharon Street.7 I’ll indicate parts of the line of argument only briefly, not claiming to do justice to it, and then comment. Our proclivities to moral judgment were shaped by natural selection. But if moral facts are mind-independent, she argues, then there’s no reason to think we would have been selected to get them right as such. Of course we, convinced as we are that pain is bad and loyalty good, will congratulate ourselves on being selected to think so. But no matter what the moral facts were, we would end up similarly congratulating ourselves on the discernment natural selection equipped us with.8 If we and Brandt’s Hopi genuinely disagree, we can’t plausibly claim that we are right and they wrong. We could claim, however, that—inhconsistencies and identifiable defects aside—they are mostly right about the reasons they have to do things, and we are mostly right about the ones we have. That way, we can both be right. The things they see as reasons tend, on that account, to be reasons in their case, and correspondingly, the things we see as reasons tend, on that account, to be reasons in our case. Aren’t we forced to conclude that all reasons to act are ultimately

grounded in something about the mind of the person whose reasons they are? (Not quite forced, perhaps: we might also answer with some sort of observer relativism—but I’ll ignore that way out as one that neither Street nor I adopt.)

**Worries over Coherence**

According to my own theory of normative concepts, normative judgments are restrictions on plans and on combinations of plans and beliefs. So the question of whether one has reason against causing chickens pain is the question of whether to weigh chickens’ pain in one’s decisions. That goes for reasons to act in the case of Brandt’s Hopi. Now when I plan what to do for a hypothetical case, I have to go by my own lights. This goes not only for planning for my own case, but for planning for the case of being one of Brandt’s Hopi. I still must plan by my own lights, and so judge the warrant of their acts and responses by my own lights. I am judging irresponsibly, to be sure, if I don’t learn what things are like for them and how the things they could do figure in their own lives and the sense of significance with which they live. These matters require great perspicacity, and I should be very cautious in judging what others ought to do, to believe, or to feel. These precautions, though, needn’t preclude me from thinking Brandt’s Hopi wrong to play the game they play.

What am I to say to Brandt’s Hopi, though? If I don’t convince them, they will disagree with me on whether animal pain in itself gives one reasons. I might be able to reason them out of their indifference to hurting a chicken, but I am stipulating a case where I couldn’t: the bearing of animal pain on what to do doesn’t follow from anything they already accept. I might, then, try to work a transformation in their views by impassioned preaching and the like. But this might not work either—and even if it did, doesn’t that just change the reasons they have?

Didn’t I already say the following? Indeed the two next paragraphs seem repetitive.

Here, as various philosophers have noted, it is important to distinguish two senses of the phrase ‘a person’s reasons’. If I ask what Hitler’s reasons were for hating all Jews, I am asking about his own thinking; “reasons” in this sense are sometimes called *operative reasons*. If, in contrast, I ask “Did Hitler had any reason to hate all Jews?” I hope you can hear me as asking about what Scanlon calls *reasons in the standard normative sense*. The issue of mind-dependence that I am discussing concerns reasons in this standard normative sense. I maintain that talk of such reasons is cogent and can be explained, and that it is coherent, even in light of plausible scientific accounts of how we come to see the things as reasons that we do, to hold that some reasons to do things aren’t rooted in one’s own proclivities to see things as reasons.

I believe that in the case of Brandt’s Hopi, the pain that a game causes a chicken is reason not to play it. According to my metanormative theory, my believing this consists in planning, for the case of being one of Brandt’s Hopi, to weigh the chicken’s pain against playing the game. In this

---

hypothetical contingency planning of mine, I ask myself, “Why, in that case, not play the game?” and I answer, “Because it hurts the chicken.” I am planning for a case of not caring about animal pain, but when you ask “Why opt for this case against playing the game?” I don’t say, “Because I’m against causing pain to animals”. I’m planning, after all, for a case where one isn’t against hurting animals. I answer, “Because it hurts the chicken.” Your question isn’t the psychological one of why I do so opt, but the planning question of why so to opt.

These appeals depend on my own theory of the concept A REASON TO in the standard normative sense. Why accept, though, that my theory gets the concept right? And whether or not it’s right on the concept we happen to have, why accept that the concept I’m describing is one that we need? My answer is that this account captures the question I’m asking when I ponder what to do in my own case, and why to do it. If my question is whether to kick a dog for fun, the reason I find to rule it out isn’t one of integrity, that I would be going against my own standards. The reason not to kick the dog is that it would hurt the beast. The question, “Why not do it?” asks for reasons, and the reasons aren’t always ones of being true to oneself. Now if all this is so in my own case, then it should be true in the case of others. Why, in their case, should all reasons to do things be ones of integrity, whereas in my own case they are not. My account interprets questions of reasons to act as the same in my own case and in the case of others. In neither case is it a question of what fits one’s responses—though, to be sure, what fits one’s responses may bear on the question one is asking.

My account, if all this is right, fits our ordinary concept of a reason to do things. And moreover, I am arguing, it is a concept we need when we think what to do and why. Still, for all I have argued so far, perhaps it tragically isn’t a concept that we can have and be coherent. Or perhaps, though we can have the concept and be coherent, the only view that coheres with a scientific view of ourselves is that all reasons are the mind-dependent, that reasons to do things must at base all be reasons of integrity. We are, after all, still faced with Brandt’s Hopi. And indeed, even if no one in fact is like Brandt’s Hopi as I stipulated them, people like them are possible. What if their views and ours can’t be reconciled purely by reasoning? Can I be justified in thinking Brandt’s Hopi fundamentally mistaken, when the only defect I can identify in them is that they don’t find an animal’s pain to bear fundamentally on how to treat it? Branding this a defect, after all, begs the question at issue between us.

Street argues that being a reason to do something consists in a kind of coherence with one’s responses. Roughly, it consists in coherence with what one spontaneously and unreflectively sees as reasons. On my view, this sort of coherence is, ultimately, what justifies us in believing something to be a reason, but it isn’t what being a reason consists in. What, then, if I knew that we and Brandt’s Hopi were all fully coherent in our thinking and that our disagreement is fundamental. I couldn’t then join with them in a common inquiry into whether animal pain matters in itself for what to do—so long as the inquiry were purely Socratic, with all reasoning proceeding from things we are already prone to accept. We would know in advance that attempts at such a joint inquiry must be futile.
Does all this, or anything in its vicinity, show that belief in mind-independent reasons as I explain it is incompatible with a scientific view of the etiology of our normative judgments? I’ll return to this question at the end of the paper—but first, I need to distinguish two kinds of realism that a quasi-realist might aim to emulate.

Normative Realism: Vast, Tempered, and Quasi

Why can’t the normative realist now say exactly the same things as I am saying? One can only rely, in the end, on one’s own lights, and join in with people who one hopes can share one’s inquiries. Other people, likewise going ultimately by their own lights, may come to different conclusions, and if they are set in their ways and coherent, one may have to take a stance toward them that is parochial. Still, by our own lights, there are reasons to do things that depend neither on the mind of the agent nor on the mind of the beholder. Being a reason is a relation between a consideration and thing a person might do, and this relation, the moral realist can say, is a matter of objective fact, sometimes independent of both agent and beholder.

Street’s Darwinian dilemma, though, still besets this kind moral realism. Ultimately I have to go by my own lights, true enough. Still, as she stresses, by my very own lights, when I think about it, natural selection wouldn’t make me an indicator of normative truth. Truth would have nothing systematic to do with what I judged to be true. All this looks like good news for opponents of normative realism.

Street poses a dilemma, though, not only for full-fledged normative realists, but for quasi-realists like me—this in an as yet unpublished paper. We quasi-realists don’t start out talking about properties and relations that are normative aspects of the world. We start with such things as plans and restrictions. The upshot, though, we claim, exactly mimics a normative realism. (When I talk about “normative realism” here, I’ll always mean of the non-naturalistic kind.) That, however, raises a new dilemma. On the one horn, we might succeed in mimicking normative realism exactly. In that case, though, we must be susceptible to the Darwinian dilemma just as much as full-fledged normative realists are. On the other horn, we might avoid building the features into our view that render normative realism susceptible to the Darwinian dilemma. In that case, we have failed in our aim of saving the features of normative realism that characterize ordinary normative thought.

We need, I think, to distinguish two kinds of non-naturalistic views whose proponents call themselves “moral realists”. First, there’s the view that moral truths and other normative truths are facts like any other, except that they aren’t empirical, naturalistic truths. They differ from scientific truths in their subject matter, but not in the features that make scientific facts genuine facts. I’ll call this vast normative realism. Such a view, though, won’t stand up to scrutiny, I

---


How Much Realism?

agree, for the kinds of reasons I have rehearsed. If moral facts are facts like any other, we have to explain how we are capable of knowing them, and how, if others disagree, they come to be less capable of knowing them. True, we can only go by our own lights. But with ordinary properties like the shapes of everyday objects, we arrive, by our own lights, as a story of how, though the evolution of our species design, we came to be capable of getting such things right. As for modern science, it is an extension of common sense, but a culturally peculiar one. We can trust parts of science, by our lights, only if there’s an account to be had of why their methods work reliably. Where there isn’t, we ought to be skeptical, and if there never is, we are left with the paradoxes of extreme science studies skepticism. By these standards, our problem is, a realist who insists that normative facts are facts like any other dooms us to normative skepticism.

Normative realism usually, though, takes a more tempered form than I am describing. Whereas vast normative realism treats our judgments as indicators of facts separate from us, laying us open to the question of whether our judgments are truly indications at all of normative facts independent of us, any more than the judgments of exotic peoples are, this tempered normative realism does no such thing. It cultivates standards for when normative judgments are to be trusted, but doesn’t follow through on treating our judgments fully as indicators of independent facts. It rejects a perceptual model for how we get moral knowledge. It denies that there could be basic normative facts beyond our power to know them. As Ronald Dworkin, a tempered moral realist, says, “If you can’t help believing something, steadily and wholeheartedly, you’d better believe it.” This isn’t good advice to a detective investigating the fact of who did a murder, absent an independently verifiable track record of correct unreasoned crime-solving convictions. It may, though, be good advice to someone asking what’s worth pursuing in life.

A vast normative realism holds normative facts up to the same epistemic standards as plain facts of our surroundings. Normative facts are bound to fail these tests. A half-way, tempered normative realism recognizes a gulf between these paradigm facts and normative facts. Normative facts, it holds, are sometimes independent of the aims and sensibilities of the people they apply to. Still, they needn’t have all the epistemic credentials of paradigm facts.

Quasi-Realism’s Advantage

With vast normative realism contrasted with a halfway, tempered normative realism, we can ask which kind a quasi-realists should aspire to mimic. The answer is clear enough. Once we

---

12 For Scanlon on how we can know what reasons we have, see What We Owe, 64–72.
14 Nagel, View from Nowhere (1986), 139.
convince ourselves that we are products of the evolution and ecological dynamics of our species with its special cultural histories, we can’t take a vast normative realism seriously. The only credible candidate for emulation is a tempered normative realism. I can now try saying this: A vast normative realism falls to Darwinian dilemmas and questions of why to think we can discern the normative facts and others cannot. A halfway, tempered normative realism isn’t so defeated, and that’s the kind of normative realism we aim to mimic.

Why, though, be a quasi-realist and not a tempered realist? Despite its cautious restraint, this tempered realist position won’t quite hold up. True enough, most of the views it takes can be interpreted as reasonable, via quasi-realism—but there is one aspect of it that can’t be. Tempered realism still insists that normative facts are just as much facts as are the paradigms of facthood. They aren’t in any way second rate as facts. If that is so, however, whence the tempering? The putative facts somehow don’t entirely act like paradigm facts, but if their facthood is what is basic to them, why don’t they? The wise realist will be a tempered one, I agree, but how shall we explain this need for tempering? The answer can’t be that normative facts are simply facts like any other.

The tempered realist is asking about something he starts out thinking to be a fact, that pain in animals matters in itself. Its being a candidate fact is supposed to figure centrally in explaining how to judge it. Like the vast realist, then, he still must face a question: should the fact that Brandt’s Hopi don’t apprehend this fact shake my faith that I myself do? It still seems that it should, unless it’s plausible that I’m better placed than they to think about such things.

What quasi-realism mimics is not tempered realism as a whole, but tempered realism in all but one aspect. Like the tempered realist, we quasi-realists can say that what makes the game of chicken-pull wrong is not our disapproval, and not some deep disquiet on the part of those who play it, but how it hurts the chicken. Like the tempered realist, we can say that we can only go by our own lights, even if by our own lights, we can’t show ourselves better equipped for normative judgment than those with whom we disagree. We can’t, though, mimic the claim that understanding normative properties and relations as objective matters of fact is basic to explaining how judgments of wrongness work. That, as I have said, isn’t a credible part of the tempered normative realist’s package.

Still, don’t similar questions arise for plans? I plan to comment substantially on student papers when I could do something more fun and get away with cursory markings on the papers. This planning manifests my thinking it more important to fulfill my responsibilities and educate my students than to be having a good time. How do I know that it’s more important? Thinking these things just consists, according to my account of normative claims, in planning to weigh some considerations more heavily than others in my decisions. But I think that a person could be mistaken in these weightings. I think Brandt’s Hopi, for instance, were mistaken in giving no weight to the pain of chickens, even though they believed that the chicken’s pain resembles our own. How do I know, then, that it isn’t I myself who am mistaken?
I’ll hold my plans up to standards that mimic, in some ways, epistemic standards for judging matters of scientific fact. I won’t, for instance, trust an ethical judgment if I think that vivid and repeated contemplation of the non-ethical facts would lead me to change my mind. Such standards we might call a normative epistemology for moral and other normative judgments. If this epistemology exactly emulates the realist’s epistemology, I agree, it will be subject to the same refutations. But it doesn’t exactly mimic a vast realist’s epistemology. It does substantially mimic a halfway, tempered realism, but not the features that lead to the collapse of such a tempered realism. Rather, it mimics the features that bring tempered realism in line with common sense. Ethical thoughts as restrictions on plans become very factual-like in some ways. That’s a principal thesis the quasi-realism strives to establish. But they are no more factual-like than emerges from such things as the possibility of disagreement. We might call them “quasi-facts”.

**Fundamental Disagreement and Deep Vindication**

What are we to conclude, then, in light of Brandt’s Hopi? Earlier, I argued two theses: First, suppose that my account of the concept A REASON TO gets it right. Then the claim that Brandt’s Hopi have reason to spare animals pain is coherent. To be sure—question-begging differences aside, such as their being indifferent to pain in animals—they are in as good a position to judge the matter as we are. Still, animal pain matters. Our question is, after all, what to do if like them and in their circumstances. If animal pain tells against an act in my own case, and this is not for further reasons that don’t obtain in the case of Brandt’s Hopi, then it tells against hypothetically tormenting animals in their case too. You may point out to me that my weighing animal pain in such hypothetical decisions results from a history of natural selection and social dynamics that might have been otherwise, and that the mechanisms involved aren’t ones we could independently expect to track the truth systematically, whatever it might be. Why, though, should that insight change what to weigh, at base, into hypothetical decisions? Second, I argued, my account of the concept indeed is right. Question of what reasons there are to do things amount to questions of what to do and why to do them. Brandt’s Hopi address such questions for their case, and I can address the very questions they address.

Can we really disagree, though, on what to do and why in a circumstance? What I describe isn’t real disagreement, we could worry. For the hypothetical case of being they, I weigh the pain an act would cause an animal against doing it, whereas for the same case—their own actual case—they don’t. Granted, this is a difference in contingency plan for exactly the same circumstance, and granted, we are each coherent in our weighings. Still, how, we can ask, is this a disagreement?

---

16 For an example of such standards, see Brandt on his “qualified attitude method”, *Ethical Theory* (1959), pp. 244–252.
My response has been this: In the first instance, disagreement has its home in one’s own thinking. Thinking involves the possibility of rejecting what one now accepts, coming to disagree with oneself across time, reacting to what one has been thinking with a “No”. This kind of disagreement applies just as much to planning as to thought about what most clearly is a matter of what’s the case. I can plan to eat another cookie and then change my mind—even if I’m coherent in my plans both before and after. Why, though, regard oneself as disagreeing not only with oneself over time, but with others? Quine argues that there’s no fact of the matter what constitutes my disagreeing with you on a matter of fact. So, in effect, does Kripke’s Wittgenstein. The point of regarding us as often disagreeing with each other, I say, is this: we sometimes need to “put our heads together” about a problem, thinking about it jointly. This applies just as much to planning for hypothetical contingencies as to thinking what’s most prosaically the case, like whether it will rain tomorrow. In particular, we can put our heads together to think what considerations to weigh in decisions in the hypothetical contingency of being one of Brandt’s Hopi.

Does fundamental disagreement, though, vitiate such a rationale? Suppose it were clear that Brandt’s Hopi and we were all ideally coherent, and still in fundamental disagreement on whether animal pain matters fundamentally. Then putting our heads together with theirs on this question would be futile. It would be futile, at any rate, if “engaging” with them consists in reasoning from shared premises. We can still try to convert them, and they can try to convert us, by vivid emotional appeals and the like—but that’s not the same as reasoning the question through. We can move on to talk about other things where agreement is in the offing. We can’t, though, reason together about the significance for action of animal pain. When purported disagreement is fundamental, we might thus try saying, it isn’t really disagreement. It’s some other kind of difference.

This contention won’t be tenable, however. There could, after all, be a fundamental impasse to on points that are most clearly matters of fact, most clearly subject to straight and genuine disagreement. Were there dinosaurs long ago? Our evidence is consistent with a hypothesis that I find bizarrely implausible: that a deceiving spirit, six thousand years ago, made the world with rock layers and fossils, junk DNA, various degrees of genetic similarity among species, and other such features, all with the aim of producing a world that has all the apparent traces of a history billions of years old, with dinosaurs and the like. Now it’s a fact, I take it, that that is not how the history of our Earth went. Still, it is at least conceivable that someone who understood the evidence and arguments would find the deceiving creator hypothesis more plausible than scientists’ consensus on the matter. I’ll call my hypothetical character, the knowledgeable, coherent dinosaur denier, “Wilberforce”.

17 I take this to be the upshot of Quine’s treatment of analyticity in his “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951) and his treatment of radical translation in Word and Object (1960).

18 Wittgenstein on Rules (1982).
How Much Realism?

His view is coherent; the problem is his bizarre sense of plausibility. In light of it, he is indeed warranted in believing that the evidence supports vast faking, a few thousand years ago, of seeming dinosaur traces. He, in the end, must rely on his sense of plausibility just as we must rely on ours. We and he disagree, and so long as he and we are all ideally coherent and aware of the same evidence, pure reasoning together will be futile. One of us might be able to convert the other, but not by pure reasoning from things we both already accept. That doesn’t mean there weren’t dinosaurs. And more to the point, it doesn’t mean that there isn’t a genuine question on which we disagree.

Street and I both distinguish matters on which a plausible scientific view of ourselves yields a non-trivial story of why we would tend to “track” facts get them right. I suggested calling matters that don’t meet this standard “quasi-facts”. This distinction between full facts and quasi-facts, though, isn’t the same as the distinction between what’s susceptible to fundamental disagreement and what isn’t. The possibility of my “Wilberforce” shows that. Neither is this distinction the same as the normative/non-normative distinction, or what I think to be the same, the distinction between what’s plan-laden and what isn’t. When it comes to epistemic oughts concerning the layout of things around us—which way the animal we are tracking went, whether it will rain tomorrow, and the like—we have a good, scientific story of why we would tend toward norms that make for high credence in truths and low credence in falsehoods. We can vindicate these norms as truth-directed.

The worry might remain, what are we disagreeing with the Brandt’s Hopi about? By stipulation, it isn’t anything natural, naturalistically conceived. My answer is no more and no less than this: we are disagreeing on what considerations to weigh, in their situation, in deciding what to do. In what sense are they mistaken? Just in the plain Aristotelian sense that they believe of what is not that it is. They believe that the pain an act would cause an animal doesn’t count against performing it—whereas it does.

The point of regarding us as capable of disagreeing with each other, I am claiming, is to let us “put our heads together” in thinking about matters, whether they are matters of what to do or matters of how things most prosaically stand. Where we know that we are all coherent and our disagreement is fundamental, this point doesn’t apply. Still, it is part of the whole package of regarding ourselves as capable of disagreeing on matters that we disagree in such cases too. We disagree, after all, with Wilberforce on whether there were dinosaurs.

Wilberforce, with his bizarre sense of plausibility, is warranted in believing there were no dinosaurs. Likewise Brandt’s Hopi, in light of their all too human sense of plausibility, are warranted in believing that an animal’s suffering is no reason in itself against tormenting it. That doesn’t mean there weren’t dinosaurs. Why, then, should it mean that in the case of Brandt’s Hopi, there’s no reason in itself not to hurt animals?
How Much Realism?

References


Street, Sharon (2008). “Mind-independence Without Mystery: Why quasi-realists can’t have it both ways”. (mss. 2008 Apr.)