HOW TO BE (AND HOW NOT TO BE) A NORMATIVE REALIST

Broadly and somewhat roughly speaking, metanormative theorists who maintain that there is normative truth fall into one of three camps: non-naturalist, naturalist and expressivist. I am interested in the prospects for normative truth, and thus in which, if any, of these positions offers hope for the discovery of such truth. In each of three chapters, I address one of these views. I conclude that our best hope is a version of naturalism. However, I reject the label “naturalism” in favor of one that I believe better accords with (what I argue to be) the semantic (as opposed to metaphysical) nature of the most prominent arguments in the relevant debate.

In Chapter 1, I target expressivism, according to which normative thought and language express non-cognitive attitudes. My work in this chapter serves as a sort of marriage between the well-trodden ground of expressivism’s embedding (or “Frege-Geach”) problem and more recent concerns about expressivism’s ability to accommodate the widely accepted “objective” nature of the normative. I explain why it will be difficult, if not impossible, for expressivists to account for a kind of commonplace nihilistic doubt that, I argue, is a symptom of such normative “objectivity.” This difficulty is exacerbated by facts about what expressivist semantics will have to look like in order for expressivists to explain how claims involving normative predicates can contradict one another (e.g., ‘x is wrong’, ‘x is not wrong’).

In Chapter 2, I address a prominent form of non-naturalism, according to which the normative is “metaphysically autonomous”—neither identical with, nor constituted by, nor constitutive of anything non-normative. I examine several important explanatory challenges non-naturalists face in normative epistemology, metaphysics and semantics and explain what proponents of this view would have to accept in order to ensure their view’s coherence. However, I argue that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to develop a plausible view along these lines.

The Open Question Argument and its contemporary cousin, Normative Twin Earth, are the most prominent objections to naturalism. In Chapter 3, I contend that these arguments rely on semantic rather than metaphysical intuitions, and thus they should be understood as targeting semantic rather than metaphysical views (e.g., not naturalism). I propose that the appropriate targets are views committed to a particular class of reference-fixing relations for normative terms. I then examine the prospects for developing a view along these lines that does not fall prey to the objections mentioned. I conclude that there is hope for realism of this kind, and close with a rough sketch of how such a view might be developed more fully.