

BUILDING REASONS WITHOUT AUTHORITY

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

My dissertation defends a comprehensive version of meta-normative skepticism holding that no standard, norm, or principle has objective authority or normative force. The view does not deny either that there are norms, standards of correctness, and principles of various kinds or that it is possible both to succeed or fail in measuring up to their prerogatives. What it does deny is that any norm has the status of commanding with objective authority, the status of giving rise to objective normative reasons to take seriously and follow its demands. Many believe objective authority is required if we are to make sense of and explain the significance of our normative practices. Without authority, they fear, any critical standpoint vis-à-vis our practices would evaporate, even when we have reached a consensus regarding critical matters, which, without correctness, appears to reflect nothing but an ultimately arbitrary choice. I disagree, and argue that while authority cannot be accommodated within the world as we know it, we don't need it either. A chief goal of my dissertation is to propose a positive interpretation of our normative practices that dispenses with authoritative facts directing us what to do. The practical question of what to make of our practices and our involvement with them, I counter, retains significance only when pursued from an engaged rather than a detached perspective – one that we adopt when, driven by our concerns and commitments, we actively participate in the resolution of practical problems, including the selection and development of which norms to live by, searching for common ground for how to coordinate our individual and joint endeavors. Even though there are no definitive answers, this deliberative enterprise is not unconstrained; it is carried out within a tight web of norms that we do already accept, a web we continuously spin and expand.

The first chapter *Two Concepts of Normativity* introduces the problematic of normative authority by insisting on the important distinction between norms and their status, between the

formal feature of being directive in character and the substantive feature of directing with authority. The first distinguishes norms as norms, including their implicit standards of correctness, but it is the second that prompts the entire meta-normative problematic in the first place. There is a common tendency to under-appreciate the meta-normative problematic, and it is partly to blame on our lack of an established vocabulary to express it. The term *normative* itself is ambiguously used, at times denoting the directive element in norms, setting them apart from historical treatises and medical records, at other times denoting their authoritative standing, setting them apart from illegitimate norms. Presumably we are all realists about norms. The public arena in which we debate how to manage our individual and joint affairs is evidently characterized by a great plurality and diversity of norms and standards directing us what to do. Undoubtedly there are plenty of oughts and shoulds *according-to-norm-such-and-such*, plenty of opportunities to commit mistakes *according-to-norm-such-and-such*, and so forth. Language and the law exemplify that indisputable fact best. Whenever we open our mouths to form a sentence we engage in a norm-guided activity. And grammaticality is but one witness for our thoroughgoing involvement with norms. Another is the law. It is unlawful in the United States to hoist any flag higher than the Stars and Stripes. Yet whether authoritative reasons, not just officials, decree that I must comply in my own enclosed yard is unclear and represents a matter wholly distinct from the recognition that I would act contrary to the law if I do not. The normative problematic as I envision it cannot be appreciated solely in terms of standards of correctness, but only in terms of the authority of standard of correctness. Norms are not the solution, but the problem.

The second chapter, *Against Non-reductive Realism*, challenges the idea that some norms just are authoritative practice-independently, even though there is no explanation why. This form of non-reductive normative realism has recently gained considerable support, and holds, in David Enoch's succinct summary, that *there are response-independent, non-natural, irreducibly normative truths, perfectly objective and universal ones, that when successful in our normative inquiries we discover rather than create or construct*. Yet to postulate an independent normative realm, I argue, provokes a metaphysics that systematically undermines all epistemic access to normative truths and renders it mysterious why

once detached from our concerns they should practically matter to us in the first place. If certain norms were authorized in practice-independent Platonic heaven, how should we ever find out which, and why should we obsequiously follow *them* rather than those that reflect our *own* concerns? Moreover, the strategy most prominently cited in support of non-reductive normative realism, namely transcendental argumentation, is unsuccessful, even if rhetorically quite impressive. Settling what to accept appears a norm-driven enterprise, the argument goes, in particular whether to accept a skeptical position such as my own. Yet, it continues, skeptics cannot coherently view as authoritative the norms *they* need to rely upon in advancing their case without also relinquishing their very skeptical denial. How, then, can they coherently recommend their view? In response, I admit that making the case for and against any hypothesis does essentially involve norms: we need criteria of argumentative correctness and success. Yet what we do not need is to presume that the norms underwriting philosophical argumentation are equipped with practice-external authority. We only need norms that in fact facilitate our epistemic and dialectical ends, and their employment is not bound up with or contingent upon the metaphysics of Platonic realism.

The third chapter, *Against Reductive Realism*, rejects the proposal that normative authority can be explained on the basis of our desires and endorsements. Initially, desire-based accounts have a lot going for them. The issue of a norm's authority arises in connection with agents, the unique consumers of standards and reasons. They are the ones to whom norms must be addressed, and it is they who must determine whether to take seriously what is so addressed. This naturally leads to the thought that a norm's authority consists in its voluntary endorsement and endorsement, the proposal must say, is a complex form of desire, a disposition to do something, instead of a judgment on the norm's authority (if it were such a judgment, the proposal would move in a circle). Yet desire-based accounts face a fatal dilemma. If the relationship between agents, their desires, and their choices is understood purely descriptively, as a complex natural-psychological phenomenon, it is clear nothing normative can fall out of it. If, however, we appeal to additional normative principles, which asserts that agents ought or have reasons to further their desired ends to explain the normative significance of desire, then we have essentially introduced a principle whose authority

cannot itself be accounted for in terms of desire. And this, I argue involves costs for desire-based accounts that far exceed the mere admission of a gap in explanation. It amounts to no less than the rejection of the very rationale that motivates desire-based accounts in the first place.

The fourth chapter, *Against Agency-Based Accounts*, introduces and rejects agency-based accounts of authority. The basic idea is this: For a norm to be authoritative is for it to be constitutive of our own agency and capacity to make practical choices. A norm that enables you to be who you are and that empowers you to ponder what to do must represent a standard you cannot escape. This quintessential Kantian strategy concurs with my own approach in its emphasis on the vantage point of the deliberating agent. The problem, however, is that constitution and authority represent rather distinct phenomena, and to equate them is to equate apples and oranges. At the very least, constitution cannot be the whole story on authority even if it was part of it, becoming apparent once we realize that many norms held authoritative are not constitutive of anything, without threatening the corresponding status just by itself. More importantly, though, the kind of necessity that underwrites constitution is not the same as that underwriting normative authority. Constitution concerns what we can't help doing more than what we should be doing. It belongs more to the purview of the engineer who designs complex norm-consuming systems than to that of the ethicist and practical philosopher. Suppose acceptance of norm N turns out to be constitutive for doing X. In that case you cannot do X while disrespecting N. Should you also care about doing X, then you would only achieve what you care about so long as you implement N. *You gotta do what you gotta do.* Yet nothing more seems to follow. In particular, nothing of the kind follows that you normatively must comply with N or that you have any reasons to do so. The impossibility of *doing-X-while-disregarding-N* could reflect some basic constraints in design-space akin to that one cannot build stable bridges while disrespecting the laws of gravity. Moreover, the inescapability of doing X itself would not change the normative situation either, but solely place yet another constraint on your practical options. Thus, even if you absolutely had to do X – a choice you simply could not evade – and further that doing X was required for complying with N, this hardly would entail any reasons to comply with N on your part. One constraint would lead to another, but the fact remains that being

constrained is not the same as having reasons. You merely would find yourself trapped in a tight corner. Might does not make right, as normative force evidently differs from brute force.

The fifth chapter, *Reasoning without Authority*, develops my counterproposal explaining how norms and social practices can have significance for us without appealing to practice-independent authority. The charge that norms we chose to live by must be arbitrary when unlicensed by external authority is shown either to merely restate of the position I challenge, or to dissolve once we can point out why those norms are significant *to us*. This second part of the project supports the first one by neutralizing the general worry that our practices would naturally falter without an external authority supporting them. The case for practice-independent authority rests on painting a grim picture of the alternative. Yet if a brighter picture of that alternative can be painted, the case for such authority loses one major column of support. This is exactly what I do in the final chapter. The idea of normative practices without authority is intriguing because it liberates practical thought against all doubts about an authority transcending our practices. It allows us to grow content with thinking of practical thought and its object as fundamentally of our own making – the only way that makes sense to me. The last part develops and defends a broadly constructivist agenda in political philosophy by neutralizing one of its greatest worries: that constructivism is deficient because of its inability to account for practice-external authority. I agree that it is unable to do that, but I disagree that it needs to do so. What I share with most of my opponents is the core belief that our practices and their internal standards are indispensable. The lesson I draw from this is different, however. What I wonder is how such a central piece of our lives could be held hostage to uncertain metaphysical truths. Rather than joining into the defense of our practices by defending authority, I maintain no such defense is needed to begin with. My opponents serve our practices poorly by rendering the very point of them contingent on normative metaphysics. By revising the interpretation I seek to conserve the practices.

The entire dissertation is drafted, and I am happy to provide sections upon request.