

–Penultimate draft–

Forthcoming in *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*. Please cite published version.

stefan.fischer@uni-konstanz.de  
University of Konstanz

## Actual Guidance is Enough

### 1 Introduction

In a recent paper, Nate Sharadin and Rob van Someren Greve pull into doubt the following seemingly self-evident idea:

*Capable*: Deontic evaluation—the application of deontic concepts to action—is capable of guiding action.<sup>1</sup>

The authors' skeptical endeavor is provocative, given that many philosophers would instantly grant that applying the concept *wrong* to an action can guide the agent in question with respect to whether or not to perform it.<sup>2</sup> In this critical note, I argue that Sharadin's and van Someren Greve's skeptical endeavor is unwarranted.

The authors' starting point is an argument schema instances of which appear throughout the literature on deontic concepts.<sup>3</sup> The point of arguments of this kind is to learn something interesting and substantive about deontic concepts by asking what these concepts would have to be like in order to serve their *function*: to guide action.<sup>4</sup>

#### Schematic argument

---

<sup>1</sup>Sharadin and van Someren Greve, *Is Deontic Evaluation Capable of What It is For?* Numbers in parentheses refer to this article and, for reasons of brevity, I will often refer to “the authors”.

<sup>2</sup>Smallcaps denote concepts.

<sup>3</sup>They mention Smith (1986); Carlson (2002); Wiland (2007); Bykvist (2007); Copp (2008).

<sup>4</sup>The authors explicitly accept this function (205).

P1 The function of deontic evaluation is to guide action (Guidance Function).

P2 If deontic concepts have feature *X*, then deontic evaluation would not be able to guide action (Disabling Condition).

∴ So, it is not the case that deontic concepts have feature *X* (Substantive Result)

Throughout their paper, the authors focus on Holly Smith’s instance of the schematic argument, as will I:

### Smith’s Argument

1. The function of deontic evaluation is to guide action (Guidance Function).

2. If the concepts *RIGHT* and *WRONG* ever apply to the same action, then deontic evaluation in terms of *RIGHT* and *WRONG* would not be able to function.<sup>5</sup> (Disabling Condition)

∴ So, it is not the case that the concepts *RIGHT* and *WRONG* ever apply to the same [action].<sup>6</sup> (Substantive Result)

---

<sup>5</sup>An anonymous referee points out that P2 is implausible. If the concepts *RIGHT* and *WRONG* applied to an action in one case, this would only show that deontic evaluation is *not always* able to function, but not that it *never* is. In Smith’s defense, I don’t think this worry is justified. Actions are wrong just when they are not-to-be-done; they are right when they are not not-to-be-done. If it were possible that *RIGHT* and *WRONG* apply to one and the same action, then the thought “ $\varphi$  is wrong (not-to-be-done)” would not preclude the thought “ $\varphi$  is right (not not-to-be-done)”. And then the thought that  $\varphi$  is wrong *alone* would be practically worthless (because thinking that an action is not-to-be-done only guides action, it seems to me, if it precludes that the action is not not-to-be-done). Therefore, Smith’s premise strikes me as plausible. But, the anonymous referee maintains, there are deontic evaluations that *still* fulfil their function, even if *RIGHT* and *WRONG* sometimes apply to the same action—namely deontic evaluations of the form “ $\varphi$  is right and not wrong”. These evaluations, the referee insists, could still provide guidance. I agree. Deontic evaluations of this, and *only this*, form would still be able to function. But, crucially—and here I stomp my foot—evaluations of the form “ $\varphi$  is wrong/right” would *not* be able to function. So, my suggestion is this: The most charitable reading of P2 states that deontic evaluations in terms of *only one* of the two concepts would not be able to function. Thus understood, P2 is plausible. Most importantly, however, I take it that Sharadin and van Someren Greve (could easily) agree with my reading of Smith. I see no problem with respect to the issues under dispute between the authors and myself. Either the anonymous referee is right and all three of us make the “mistake” of ignoring a problem in Smith’s argument, or the referee is wrong and none of us makes a mistake. But even if the authors and myself make a mistake here, all that follows is that we need to find another instance of the schematic argument to get our discussion going. (And, as Sharadin and van Someren Greve show, there are many versions to be found.) So, in the context of the current paper, not much depends on this dispute about Smith’s second premise.

<sup>6</sup>I slightly changed Smith’s formulation of P2 and the conclusion. Nothing of substance is lost.

Smith’s argument serves to illustrate the theoretical appeal of arguments of this kind: It supposedly generates an interesting and substantive insight—it is a mistake to apply RIGHT and WRONG to the same action—on the basis of the idea that the point of deontic evaluation is to guide action.

However, Sharadin’s and van Someren Greve’s main claim is that we cannot really learn anything interesting and substantive from arguments of this kind because they have a hidden premise which, as it turns out, cannot be defended in a satisfying way. We have already seen it:

*Capable*: Deontic evaluation is capable of guiding action.

The authors are right: The schematic argument does presuppose that deontic evaluation *can*, in principle, guide action. (*Capable* is “hidden” in Guidance Function: Calling *F* the function of *A* implies that there are at least some instances of *A* that “fulfill” *F*.) If deontic evaluation was, in principle, incapable of guiding action, the argument clearly wouldn’t work. And so it turns out that the plausibility of the schematic argument—and whether or not it can lead to interesting, substantive results—depends on the truth of *Capable*. Consequently, Sharadin and van Someren Greve investigate how *Capable* might be defended. After discussing several possible defenses, the authors ultimately conclude that none of them are satisfying (227).

In this discussion note, my focus lies on two of the discussed defenses. The first one is the platitude argument.<sup>7</sup> It states that *Capable* is a platitude that need not be defended. The second is the pragmatist argument. It states that deontic concepts are *defined* as the concepts that are capable of guiding action, in which case there is no room to doubt the truth of *Capable*.<sup>8</sup> Note that these two arguments are not independent of each other. The pragmatist strategy *explains* why *Capable* is a platitude; if being capable of guiding action were a definitional feature of deontic concepts, it would be plitudinously true that they can do so. Nevertheless, I am going to treat both arguments separately. Even though, personally, I am most sympathetic with the pragmatist argument, I think the platitude argument can be defended against the authors’ worries without it.

So, in the following, I am going to argue that the authors’ criticism of the platitude and the pragmatist argument is unfounded. If I am right, the attempt to kick off their eponymous controversy about deontic evaluation fails. My two main worries with the authors’ position concerns their (I

---

<sup>7</sup>See sections 2.1 and 2.2 of the original paper.

<sup>8</sup>See section 3 of the original paper.

argue:) implausibly broad understanding of what it means to be actually guided by a deontic evaluation and a certain unclarity about what is to count as an “interesting and substantive” conclusion produced by the schematic argument. I ultimately provide a positive outlook: We may remain optimistic about the prospects of learning something interesting and substantive about deontic concepts by investigating their function: providing actual guidance, properly understood.

## 2 The Platitude Argument

Before we ask ourselves whether *Capable* is a platitude, let’s have a closer look at what it says. The authors present two interpretations that are based on two different understandings of action guidance, namely “actual guidance” (AG) and “correct guidance” (CG).

**Capable<sub>AG</sub>** A concept is capable of *actually guiding* when an agent’s thinking about something in terms of that concept helps settle, for the agent, what they shall do [...] and (at least in part) motivates the agent toward doing that thing. (211)

**Capable<sub>CG</sub>** A concept is capable of *correctly guiding* when an agent’s thinking about something in terms of that concept helps *correctly settle*, for the agent, what they shall do [...] and (at least in part) motivates the agent toward doing that thing. (211)

There is a further ambiguity in *Capable* that needs to be addressed. It concerns the involved quantifiers. *Capable* might be understood as saying that, *for every* action alternative  $\varphi$ , a deontic evaluation of  $\varphi$  helps settle the agent what to do. But this would be too strong for a simple reason: Morality is silent on many practical issues.<sup>9</sup> If I ask myself whether I should watch a movie or play a video game tonight, a deontic evaluation of both actions alternatives (as, say, permitted) does not help me settle the issue. Therefore, *Capable* is best understood as stating that *there are some* action alternatives such that deontic evaluations of them help the agents in question settle what to do.

Having explained this, it is quite clear that *Capable<sub>AG</sub>* is a platitude.<sup>10</sup> As soon as we have a single example for an agent who applies the concept

<sup>9</sup>Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

<sup>10</sup>The authors agree, 211.

WRONG to an action such that this helps him settle whether to perform the action, the agent has been actually guided by her deontic evaluation. Then,  $Capable_{AG}$  turns out true. It will be very easy to find one such example.

However, note that  $Capable_{CG}$  is not obviously true. For, whether an agent is correctly guided by applying the concept WRONG to an action trivially depends on whether or not the action is, in fact, wrong. (One can falsely believe an action wrong.) In other words, while the platitude argument can help us defend  $Capable_{AG}$ , it cannot help us defend  $Capable_{CG}$ .

The next step is crucial. The authors now claim that we *must* understand *Capable* in terms of correct guidance. Why? Because, they say, Smith’s argument (as well as the schematic argument) has two features, and it could only have these features if we understood action guidance as correct guidance: Smith’s argument is (1) *sound*, and it is (2) *interesting and substantive*. So, in short, the authors’ case against the platitude argument is that the interpretation of *Capable* it defends is simply *not* the interpretation we need to get Smith’s argument to work. Thus, the platitude argument fails.

I will proceed to discuss the authors’ following two claims in turn:

1.  $Capable_{AG}$  renders Smith’s argument unsound.
2.  $Capable_{AG}$  renders Smith’s argument uninteresting and non-substantive.

My point of attack is this: I do not think that Smith’s argument (and, thus, the schematic argument) could only be sound, interesting, and substantive if we understood *Capable* in terms of correct guidance. I will outline a natural and coherent sense of “actual guidance”—the mundane sense—which, while falling well short of correct guidance, nevertheless renders Smith’s argument sound, interesting, and substantive. Moreover, I will suggest that the platitude argument can be used to defend *Capable* in my “mundane” understanding of actual guidance.

## 2.1 Actual Guidance Does Not Render Smith’s Argument Unsound

Here is Smith’s argument in the *Actual Guidance* interpretation.

### Smith’s Argument<sub>AG</sub>

1. The function of deontic evaluation is to actually guide action.

2. Deontic evaluation is capable of actually guiding action.  
(*Capable<sub>AG</sub>*)
  3. If the concepts `RIGHT` and `WRONG` ever apply to the same action, then deontic evaluation in terms of `RIGHT` and `WRONG` would not be able to function.
- ∴ So, it is not the case that the concepts `RIGHT` and `WRONG` ever apply to the same action.

The authors suggest that this argument is unsound because it has a false premise.<sup>11</sup> Since they grant the truth of the first two premises (207–8), the only available point of attack is the third:

[Smith’s argument in terms of actual guidance] lacks any [...] plausibility if the point of deontic evaluation is simply to *actually* guide action. [...] Why should we think that the fact that the concepts `WRONG` and `RIGHT` apply to the same action would somehow interfere with this capacity? At most what is true is that *thinking* these two concepts apply to the same action would make it more difficult in practice—though not at all *impossible* in practice—for deontic evaluation to actually guide action. [...] Notice that an agent’s ability to *actually* be guided by deontic evaluation in her action is not even affected by the fact that these concepts apply to the same action unless, as a matter of fact, she thinks both concepts apply. (213)

I have two remarks about this passage. First, in our current context it seems unhelpful to differentiate between the *fact* that a deontic concept applies to an action and the *thought* that it applies. Deontic evaluation is the application of deontic concepts to actions (211)—which, of course, takes place in practical

---

<sup>11</sup>I am not sure whether they additionally claim that the argument is invalid in the sense that true premises would not guarantee a true conclusion. The paper oscillates between the terms “invalid,” “unsound,” and “far less plausible”. There are two points in the paper where the authors explicitly say that the argument is invalid. On p. 215 they claim that correct guidance is needed for the argument schema “to be valid;” and on p. 217 they claim that the argument schema is invalid without *Capable<sub>CG</sub>*. However, I do not think this is correct. Consider a formal version of the argument:

1. The function of *A* is *F*.
  2. *A* is capable of *F*.
  3. If *A* had property *X*, then it would not be able to function.
- ∴ So, *A* does not have property *X*.

This seems to be a valid argument (even if “*F*” means “providing actual guidance”). However, in the following, I neglect validity and only focus on the charge that the argument is unsound in virtue of having a false premise.

*thought*. Therefore, the question we are interested in at this point in the dialectic is whether or not *thinking* that a deontic concept applies to an action actually helps the agent in question settle whether to perform it.

Second, and more importantly, I am a bit startled that the authors do not seem to worry that a classification of an action as both right *and* wrong might cause actual guidance issues. Suppose Fatima ponders on whether she should  $\varphi$  and concludes that  $\varphi$ -ing is right *and* wrong. To my mind, it seems rather obvious that this deontic evaluation didn't "help settle" Fatima's question of whether or not to  $\varphi$ . But the authors make it very clear that deontic evaluations of this kind do guide action:

[W]hat will happen is that the agent will find herself being actually guided towards the action (since it is right) and actually guided away from it (since it is wrong), with the result that, in the end, she will either perform it or not. Whatever she does, as a matter of fact *she will have been actually guided*. (214)

This, it seems to me, is an implausibly broad understanding of "being actually guided". I believe that deontic evaluations of this kind do not "help settle" the issue in a way that deserves this label. In contrast, they are entirely practically unhelpful. Let me explain.

In practical deliberations, we try to figure out what to do. A deontic evaluation is part of this process; so, the practical issue at the heart of this evaluation is figuring out whether or not to  $\varphi$ . And, intuitively, if a deontic evaluation of  $\varphi$  does not bring an agent any "closer" to deciding whether or not to  $\varphi$ , we would not say that the evaluation has helped her figure out what to do.<sup>12</sup>

Now, it is clear that we can figure out what to do *correctly* and *incorrectly*. Let us say that we do so correctly just when the result of our deontic evaluation of  $\varphi$  represents the *objective* deontic properties of  $\varphi$ , that is, the deontic properties  $\varphi$  actually has. And let us say that we do so incorrectly if it does not. We may distinguish these objective deontic properties from the *subjective* deontic properties, that is, the ones *we believe*  $\varphi$  has. In other words, subjective deontic properties are the deontic properties as they present themselves from our own epistemic outlook. Since we can falsely believe an action to have a property, subjective and objective deontic properties can come apart. Then, as I am going to say, our *subjective deontic landscape* and the *objective*

---

<sup>12</sup>I appeal to the reader's intuition here, but my ultimate point will not rely on an intuition.

*deontic landscape* come apart. However, importantly, only the objective deontic landscape determines the correctness of deontic evaluations. I take it that Sharadin and van Someren Greve accept all of this.

This distinction between objective and subjective deontic properties allows us to make a further distinction between two ways in which a deontic evaluation can “help settle” an agent whether or not to  $\varphi$ .

1. **Correct** A deontic evaluation helps an agent to *correctly* settle what to do just when it brings her subjective deontic landscape closer to the objective one and (at least in part) motivates the agent toward performing the action under consideration.<sup>13</sup>
2. **Mundane** A deontic evaluation helps an agent to *mundanely* settle what to do just when it changes the agent’s subjective deontic landscape and, thereby, changes the agent’s motivation toward the action under consideration.<sup>14</sup>

These, I take it, are two natural and coherent senses of “helping to settle” an agent what to do. While it seems clear that the first sense is much more ambitious and, typically, the one we strive for, it is similarly clear that something could help us settle what to do only in the second, more mundane, sense. For example, my friend’s comment that the bus fares are outrageously expensive could help me settle to dodge the fare by making me believe that it might not be wrong to do so once a month (and by changing my motivation respectively). Then, my friend’s comment would help me settle what to do in the mundane sense.

With this distinction in mind, let us return to Fatima. We have already seen that it couldn’t be a platitude that deontic evaluation helps her to correctly settle what to do; whether or not her deontic evaluation tracks the objective deontic properties of  $\varphi$ -ing is entirely open. Next, does it help her to *mundanely* settle what to do? The answer, I think, must be “no”. Other things equal, her deontic evaluation does not change her subjective deontic landscape at all. According to her evaluation,  $\varphi$ -ing is wrong (not-to-be-done) *and* right (not not-to-be-done). This evaluation is entirely unhelpful. Other things equal, Fatima isn’t any closer to figuring out whether or not

<sup>13</sup>This sense of “help settle” corresponds to what the authors’ call *Correct Capable* (216).

<sup>14</sup>Note that, according to *Mundane*, it is possible that an agent’s deontic evaluation helps her settle a practical question incorrectly because, here, only the agent’s own epistemic outlook is relevant, irrespective of the objective deontic properties.



to  $\varphi$ , at least not (solely) in virtue of her deontic evaluation. Therefore, we may conclude, Fatima’s deontic evaluation does not help her settle whether or not to  $\varphi$ . And this means, crucially, that she has *not* been actually guided by it, at least not in the mundane sense of “actual guidance”.<sup>15</sup>

But Sharadin and van Someren Greve argue that Fatima’s deontic evaluation *does* provide her with actual guidance. This must mean that their understanding of “help settle” differs from our mundane sense. They must have an even less ambitious, broader sense in mind. What sense is that? As we saw in the above quote, it is a sense according to which Fatima “will have been actually guided” by her deontic evaluation because it steers her towards  $\varphi$ -ing and it steers her away from it.

I find this claim highly unintuitive, however the respective sense of “help settle” would have to be spelled out.<sup>16</sup> But my main point does not rely on an intuition. What’s important is that we *can* (naturally and coherently) understand “actual guidance” in the above, mundane sense. And this mundane sense makes Smith’s argument sound. Given the mundane sense, Fatima is not actually guided by her deontic deliberation. And thus, contrary to the authors’ claims, we do not need *Capable<sub>CG</sub>* to render Smith’s argument sound.

Remember: The authors claim that a deontic evaluation according to

---

<sup>15</sup>An anonymous referee points out that the thought “ $\varphi$  is right and wrong” might help an agent mundanely settle what to do in a special case, namely, when she previously thought that  $\varphi$  was *only* right. In this case, she would come to think that the action is *also* wrong, which would change her subjective deontic landscape and, thereby, her motivation toward  $\varphi$ -ing. Two quick replies. Firstly, this is why I use the “other things equal” qualification in the main text. The “other things equal” is meant to exclude scenarios like the one envisioned by the anonymous referee. I agree with the referee’s objection in so far that, in the scenario (s)he envisions, the deontic evaluation helps the agent to mundanely settle what to do; but it would not do so “on its own”. It would only help the agent to mundanely settle what to do because she *previously* had evaluated the situation differently. The deontic evaluation alone, without the previous evaluation, remains entirely unhelpful. Secondly, and more importantly, call to mind the relevant disagreement between the authors and myself: They purport that Fatima’s deontic evaluation *always* provides actual guidance; I claim that it does not. All I need to defend my claim is my mundane sense of actual guidance and *one* scenario in which Fatima is not guided in the mundane sense by her thought that  $\varphi$  is right and wrong. And there clearly are scenarios of this kind. So, as far as I can see, the anonymous referee’s imagined case, in which this deontic evaluation helps the agent to mundanely settle what to do *in the context of* another, previously made deontic evaluation, does not affect my argument against Sharadin and van Someren Greve.

<sup>16</sup>In an email conversation, one of the authors suggests that one actually guides a remote control car by randomly waggling the controls. This strikes me as grist for my mill. It is at least not self-evident, I think, that “providing” a remote control car with completely random directions can naturally be called “guidance”. Instead, it seems more natural to say that the car is “shoved around”; and, intuitively, something similar seems to hold in the case of Fatima’s deontic evaluation.

which an action is both right and wrong still provides *actual* guidance. But, as we have now seen, this move presupposes two things: (1) an extremely broad sense of “actual guidance” and (2) the claim that this is *the only sense* of “actual guidance” available to Smith. But this extremely broad sense of “actual guidance” does not seem to be the only available sense. We formulated a different, narrower sense of “actual guidance” that is natural, coherent, and *prima facie* plausible.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, our mundane sense of “actual guidance” can be defended with the platitude argument. While it is clearly not platitudinous that deontic evaluation is capable of *correctly* guiding action, it seems quite obvious that deontic evaluation is capable of *mundanely* guiding action, that is, capable of helping to settle what to do by changing the agents’ subjective deontic landscape and, thereby, her motivational setup.

## 2.2 Actual Guidance Does not Render Smith’s Argument Uninteresting

Smith’s argument concludes that the concepts RIGHT and WRONG never apply to the same action. According to Sharadin and van Someren Greve, this is a “substantive, first-order normative result” (207). But, they continue, in order to reach this result, Smith needs *Capable<sub>CG</sub>*. *Capable<sub>AG</sub>*, they think, is not enough.<sup>18</sup> But again, I am not convinced.

Let us start by reflecting on the meaning of “apply” in the conclusion of Smith’s argument. “Apply”, as used here, cannot be a success term. A deontic evaluation is the application of deontic concepts to actions. And such applications can be incorrect. So, according to Smith’s argument, it is a mistake *to think* that both concepts apply to one and the same action. This means that her conclusion—that RIGHT and WRONG never apply to the same action—must be understood as a claim about *concepts*, and not about *properties*. The argument tells us that it is *incoherent to think* that an action is both right and wrong.

Now, as we saw, Sharadin and van Someren Greve claim that Smith’s

---

<sup>17</sup>Note that it is not crucial for my argument that my mundane sense is *the* correct understanding of “actual guidance”. Maybe there are better ones. But it is important to see that, at this point in their paper, the authors’ skeptical endeavor entirely hinges on an extremely broad understanding of “actual guidance”. As soon as we use a narrower (and, to my mind, more intuitively compelling) notion, their argument does not work anymore.

<sup>18</sup> “[I]t is not clear that there is *any* interesting instance of [the schematic argument] that is true when ‘guidance’ is interpreted as ‘actual guidance’ (214)”.

argument is interesting and substantive. But what exactly, according to them, renders a conclusion interesting and substantive? Unfortunately, this doesn't become entirely clear. At times, they seem to suggest that the schematic argument delivers substantive (and interesting) results only if it tells us something about deontic properties, or an "independent realm of facts" (218, 227).<sup>19</sup> At other times, they sound as if the argument is substantive because it has "first-order normative" implications about the correctness of deontic principles (207). Then again, they also describe the schematic argument as providing a "substantive conclusion about the nature of deontic concepts" (206), a claim that does not involve anything about deontic properties. What to make of this?

Three remarks are in order. First of all, it seems clear to me that the schematic argument, since it is an argument about the nature of deontic concepts, *could not*, by itself, deliver insights about an "independent realm of facts" or deontic properties. The reason is simple: Concepts aren't properties or facts. Therefore, expecting that the schematic argument may yield conclusions about deontic properties or facts rests on a confusion between concepts on the one hand and properties (or facts) on the other.<sup>20</sup>

Second, note that arguments need *not* imply anything about deontic properties or facts in order to have first-order, normative implications. Suppose somebody proposes the first-order moral principle that an action is right just when it increases the number of squared circles in the universe. It is a legitimate criticism of this principle that, given the *meaning* of "square" and "circle", the principle is incorrect.<sup>21</sup>

Third, this means that, if Smith's argument is "interesting and substantive," it must be because it tells us something about the nature of deontic concepts; and *not* about properties or facts. But then it becomes unclear why Sharadin and van Someren Greve believe that we need *Capable*<sub>CG</sub> in order for Smith's argument to generate an interesting and substantive result. After all, the notion of "correct guidance" is only introduced to distinguish deontic

<sup>19</sup>This, I take it, is what motivates their discussion of the platitude argument for realists in section 2.2.

<sup>20</sup>It is a main point of the authors' paper that "we cannot infer from the fact that a kind of evaluation (and the concepts it involves) provides [actual guidance] to the fact that it provides [correct guidance]" (215). I fully agree. And the reason is, as we just said, that concepts aren't properties or facts.

<sup>21</sup>In a footnote on p. 207, the authors note that Smith's argument is "explicitly directed" at an act-utilitarian principle proposed in Tännsjö (1985). My point here is simply that the argument does not need to appeal to properties or facts in order to be "directed" at a first-order principle.

evaluations that point us towards the *objective deontic properties* from those that do not. But, as we just said, the conclusion of Smith’s argument—as the authors themselves formulate it (207)—says nothing about objective deontic properties. And, being an argument about *concepts*, how could it?

So, the crucial question is whether or not Smith’s argument can deliver “interesting and substantive” results without implying anything about objective deontic properties or an independent realm of deontic facts. I think it can, for the following two considerations. Firstly, as the authors themselves stress, Smith’s argument has the already mentioned first-order normative implication; it tells us something about the conditions under which deontic principles are incoherent. This, I think, qualifies as interesting. Secondly, Smith’s argument tells us something about the relation between the concepts *RIGHT* and *WRONG*: They are mutually exclusionary. This means, like we just said, that it is incoherent to think they apply to the same action; which, interestingly, implies that the following two claims are inconsistent.

1. Our concepts *RIGHT* and *WRONG* refer to rightness and wrongness.
2. There are moral dilemmas; it is possible that an action instantiates rightness and wrongness.

These claims are inconsistent because *RIGHT* and *WRONG* are exclusionary concepts and, thus, could not refer to non-exclusionary properties. This result, I think, qualifies as “interesting” and, arguably, as “substantive”. It implies that moral philosophers who use *our* concepts *RIGHT* and *WRONG* and who believe in moral dilemmas must change something about their views.<sup>22</sup> This, I think, qualifies as an interesting and substantive result. Thus, we do not need *Capable<sub>CG</sub>* to make Smith’s argument interesting and substantive. *Capable<sub>AG</sub>* (perhaps in our mundane sense) is sufficient. With actual guidance, Smith’s argument bears the result that it is conceptually incoherent to believe that an action is both right and wrong; a result that bears interesting implications, two of which we just mentioned.

This concludes my discussion of Sharadin’s and van Someren Greve’s treatment of the platitude argument. As we have seen, they claim (1) that we must understand *Capable* in terms of correct guidance or else Smith’s argument is neither sound nor interesting. And, they continue, (2) *this* sense of *Capable* is not a platitude. Therefore, (3) the platitude argument fails. We

---

<sup>22</sup>They must either engage in conceptual engineering or reject the existence of moral dilemmas.

have argued that (1) is false. There is a natural and coherent (“mundane”) understanding of “actual guidance” that renders Smith’s argument both sound and interesting. Moreover, as already suggested at the end of the last section, it does not seem far-fetched to defend the idea that deontic evaluation is platitudinously capable of guiding action in the mundane sense. It seems quite obvious that, at least in some contexts, coming to believe that  $\varphi$  is wrong changes the agent’s subjective deontic landscape and her motivational setup.<sup>23</sup>

### 3 The Pragmatist Argument

Some authors claim that deontic concepts are *essentially* (by definition) capable of guiding action.<sup>24</sup> Sharadin and van Someren Greve discuss this proposal under the label “pragmatism”. While they agree that it is a promising defense of *Capable* and declare their sympathies with it, they stress, again, that it would render Smith’s argument uninteresting and non-substantive (225–6). The pragmatist strategy, they think, prevents instances of the schematic argument from “representing independent arguments for novel, surprising conclusions about the nature of deontic concepts;” such arguments would simply become “long-winded ways of reiterating one’s view about the functional role of deontic concepts” (226).

Again, and for the reasons already mentioned in the previous section, I find this overly pessimistic. “Mere” implications of one’s view about the functional role of deontic concepts can bear philosophically interesting fruits. For example, Smith’s argument implies that certain deontic principles are

---

<sup>23</sup>In response, the authors might suggest that, platitudinously, even astrological concepts like TAUREAN can help settle agents what to do in the mundane sense, which hardly generates philosophically interesting results (cf. 214–15). Two short comments: First, I never claimed that we get interesting philosophical results from the fact that, platitudinously, deontic concepts can guide action in the mundane sense. The interesting results are generated from this platitude *in the context of Smith’s argument*; and, in particular, from the idea that it is the *function* of deontic concepts to guide action. The fact that even astrological concepts meet the “incredibly low bar” (215) of being capable of actually guiding action changes nothing about that. Second, the authors discuss astrological concepts to drive home the point that *actual* guidance and *correct* guidance are worlds apart (cf. 214–5). This is, of course, true (since concepts aren’t properties or facts). But, again, this changes nothing about the interesting results generated by Smith’s argument.

<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of the pragmatist argument, see sec. 3 of the article. One “pragmatist” author not mentioned by the authors is Simon Kirchin, who characterizes all normative concepts by saying that their “logic [...] dictates that direction follows” (2013, 183). A further note: I agree with Sharadin and van Someren Greve’s suggestion (225) that Smith is most charitably understood as a pragmatist. If true, pragmatism would explain why *Capable* is a platitude, thereby rendering an independent discussion of the platitude argument obsolete.

incoherent. So, it seems, even by the authors' own standard of what renders an argument interesting and substantive (207), Smith's argument—with a pragmatist defense of *Capable*—is interesting. Therefore, Sharadin's and van Someren Greve's criticism of the pragmatist argument seems unwarranted.

Let me close with one further remark about the authors' final assessment of pragmatism:

But adopting [pragmatism] requires giving up a certain degree of ambition when it comes to limning the nature of the deontic by way of our practices. Or rather, it requires giving up the thought that, in doing so, one is limning the nature of some *independent realm of facts* that can be characterized independently from the way in which it is embedded in the lives of creatures like us. (227)

I believe that this is a mischaracterization of the situation we find ourselves in at end of the authors' paper. As they themselves rightly pointed out, the *actual* application of a concept to an action and its *correct* application can be worlds apart. This gap could not, in principle, be closed by reflections on the nature of deontic concepts alone. So, *any* attempt to close the gap in this way is bound to fail. Consequently, anyone who shares the above "ambition" confuses the subjective deontic landscape—the deontic properties as they present themselves in thought—with the objective one. And, therefore, giving up the endeavor to close the gap between the subjective and the objective deontic landscape via the schematic argument is not giving up an ambition—it is clearing up a confusion.

In the end, Sharadin's and van Someren Greve's article leaves me somewhat perplexed: Do proponents of the schematic argument typically believe to limn an independent deontic realm? I suspect that many authors who use the schematic argument are pragmatists (about *Capable*) and do not aim to limn an independent deontic realm—in which case a part of the critical points Sharadin and van Someren Greve raise would not apply.<sup>25</sup> In any case, we learned this much: If you are a realist about deontic properties, you cannot use the schematic argument to gain insights about an independent deontic realm. My criticism notwithstanding, the authors' considerations nicely drive this point home. But their assessment of the pragmatist strategy

---

<sup>25</sup>I thus think that the importance of the authors' considerations (partly) depends on the number of realists who actually proceed in this way.

still seems overly pessimistic. As long as we do not expect the schematic argument to tell us something about an independent deontic realm (which, again, most pragmatists probably wouldn't expect), the argument is capable of providing interesting philosophical results. Given their sympathies with the pragmatist strategy, Sharadin and van Someren Greve might welcome this result.

## 4 Conclusion

In this note, I have argued that Sharadin's and van Someren Greve's attempt to pull into doubt a seemingly self-evident idea, *Capable*, is unsuccessful. According to the authors, two possible defenses of *Capable*—the platitude and the pragmatist argument—fail because they cannot defend *Capable* in the sense needed ("correct guidance") to achieve interesting and substantive results. Here, I have argued that we don't need to understand *Capable* in this sense to achieve results of this kind. In particular, and despite the authors' claim to the contrary, I showed that Smith's instance of the schematic argument is both sound and interesting if we understand *Capable* in a natural, intuitively plausible, mundane sense of "actual guidance" that falls well short of "correct guidance". And, in defense of the pragmatist strategy, I have argued that, as long as we don't expect the schematic argument to deliver results it would be (metaphysically) confused to expect, we may remain optimistic about the prospects of learning something philosophically interesting from it.<sup>26</sup>

stefan.fischer@uni-konstanz.de  
University of Konstanz

---

<sup>26</sup>Thanks to the anonymous referees from *JESP* for their constructive feedback and to Nate Sharadin and Rob van Someren Greve for a short but helpful email discussion.

## References

- Bykvist, K. (2007). Violations of normative invariance: Some thoughts on shifty oughts. *Theoria*, 73(2):98–120.
- Carlson, E. (2002). Deliberation, foreknowledge, and morality as a guide to action. *Erkenntnis*, 57(1):71–89.
- Copp, D. (2008). 'Ought' implies 'can' and the derivation of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities. *Analysis*, 68(297):67–75.
- Kirchin, S. (2013). Evaluation, Normativity and Grounding. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol.:179–98.
- Sharadin, N. and van Someren Greve, R. (2021). Is Deontic Evaluation Capable of Doing What it is For? *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 19(3):203–229.
- Smith, H. (1986). Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 83(6):341–345.
- Tännsjö, T. (1985). Moral Conflict and Moral Realism. *Journal of Philosophy*, 82(3).
- Wiland, E. (2007). How Indirect can Indirect Utilitarianism Be? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74(2).