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Abstract:	Ruth Chang argues against three dogmas of normativity. Her argument, as least about the first two, is defensible, and defensible on a naturalistic account of normativity of a distinct kind from her own account.

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On Three Dogmas of Normativity

Philip Pettit

In 'Three Dogmas of Normativity', Ruth Chang puts forward three claims of radical significance for moral philosophy and normative theory more generally. First, that when something is normatively right or good, it has that feature only relative to 'ordinary substantive normative considerations': 'covering considerations', as she also casts them (11). Second, that things may compare in rightness or goodness, not just through one being better or worse than the other, or the two being equally right or good, but through the two being on a par: roughly, in 'the same "neighborhood" of value' (17). And third, that the ground on which something counts as right or good may sometimes be 'under our direct volitional control' (18): it may be a consideration that we put 'our very selves behind' in what she calls 'commitment' (23). Chang argues that holding by these claims—rejecting the dogmas they oppose—requires us to think of rational agency in an active or constructive fashion and that it has some iconoclastic implications for how we conceive of a range of practices from decision theory to cost-benefit analysis, to the shareholder view of corporate responsibility.

In my paper I present a viewpoint from within which at least the first two of Chang's claims are defensible and appealing, offering support in that regard for the position she occupies. But the viewpoint from which I defend the claims, developed more fully elsewhere, is rather different from hers.[1] It consists in a naturalistic story in which the notion of normativity is explained rather than taken for granted; this viewpoint is consistent with her approach, but she may not find it congenial. I address only the core claims she makes, ignoring the issue of how they bear on our conception of rational agency and on our assumptions in areas like decision theory and cost-benefit analysis.

The discussion falls into two sections. In the first I summarize the naturalistic account from within which it is intelligible that people should have developed normative concepts, giving them referents that make normative claims truth-conditional, and that they should give particular importance to a moral point of view. And in the second I explain

why the claims that Chang defends, challenging though they may be, are generally supported within that account.

1. A naturalistic explanation of the normative

How to make sense of why we, the products of a natural evolution, come to use normative concepts in the characterization of the natural world of which we are part? This is a world whose constitution and operation is wholly intelligible, so I assume, in non-normative terms. So, what explains our use of normative concepts in characterizing it, where that characterization is made true or false by how the world is; it is not of purely emotional or expressive significance?

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A good way of doing this would be to construct a story about how creatures otherwise like us that lack normative concepts would be led to employ them in representing their situation. In order to serve an illuminating purpose, the story would have to be psychologically and socially plausible in the pre-normative starting point assumed, and it would have to show that starting from there, creatures like us would be robustly likely—likely, regardless of a variety of contingencies—to come to talk and think in normative ways. It would have to do for normativity in general what H.L.A.Hart did for law in the 1960's when he explained why people lacking legal practices or concepts would be robustly likely, at least in a relatively large society, to develop and sustain them.[2] It would have to provide for normative practice and thought what Bernard Williams describes as a philosophical genealogy, Matthieu Queloz as a pragmatic genealogy.[3]

Summarizing a genealogy, a plausible story about how normative thinking is likely to emerge in that counterfactual world would argue, broadly, that conversable creatures like us

1) will live in need of being able to rely on one another;
2) will want to convince others of their reliability in order to be able to rely on them;
3) will therefore commit in different contexts to holding by certain desires robustly;
4) will come to think of properties that make things robustly attractive as their values;
5) will hold different sets of values answering to different commissive contexts; and
6) will give convergently or concordantly valued properties a special moral status.[4]

Let us imagine ourselves in the position of these imagined agents. Being the sorts of creatures we are, we will certainly need to be able to rely on one another on a variety of fronts, as the first claim has it. We will each need to be able to rely on others, for example, generally to tell the truth in response to inquiries, to make and keep promises, to avoid aggression and violence, and to reject theft if there are property conventions in place. But we can hardly rely on others to be cooperative in such ways unless, as in the second claim, we prove reliable ourselves. If we do not prove reliable in some instance, then those we let down, those who see us let them down, and those among whom word of our behavior spreads, may be expected to shun us or to punish us in something like a tit-for-tat manner.[5] Proving unreliable will damage our reputation: our standing in the local economy of esteem.[6]

How will we assure others of our reliability: in particular, our reliability in holding by desires and intentions that they will welcome, or can live with, and in acting as those attitudes require? We might report the attitudes to others, as we might report the attitudes of a third party. But such a report would be cheap, for we could always seek to explain a failure to act on reported desires or intentions in a way that excused us: in a way that preserved a reputation for being generally reliable. We could argue, as we might with any report, that we were misled by the evidence: in this case, evidence about our own mind.

How might we do better in conveying our reliability? Well, we might avow desires or intentions in a way that foreclosed the misleading-mind excuse. We might present ourselves as having made up our minds about what to seek or do; communicate that we have a maker's rather than an observer's awareness of our desires or intentions; and that not having relied on observational evidence about those attitudes in avowing them, we rule out in advance the possibility of excusing any failure to display them by appeal to having been misled by the evidence about our mind.

Where a self-report would canonically take the form of a remark such as 'The evidence I have on my dispositions indicates that I have a desire to X', the avowal would take a form such as: 'Xing would be fun' 'Xing would be fair', 'Xing is the appealing option'. By taking such a form it would indicate that the speaker had formed a preference for Xing or, given a suitable context, an intention to X in light of its desiderative properties: they had

made up their mind in favor of Xing and knew for that non-observational reason how they were disposed.

If we avow a desire or intention in that manner, then we will voluntarily take on the risk of not being able to excuse a failure to live up to it that a report would allow. Thus, the avowal is a more expensive way of communicating the attitude than a report; in the game-theoretic sense, as the third proposition registers, it constitutes a commitment to acting on the attitude. Insofar as it is more expensive in this commissive manner, the avowal will also be more credible. It will hold out a welcome prospect for each of us of convincing others about our dispositions towards them and may be expected to become a common practice.[7]

When we speak for our desires in the mode of avowal, as already indicated, we will do so on the basis of the desiderative properties that we take to support them. But if those desiderata are going to make avowal rational—if they are going to justify the risk inherent in the commitment—they had better not be attractive for us just in the contingent way in which a feature may prompt a whimsical or impulsive desire; they need to attract us robustly over variations of desire that would prompt wayward, unpredictable behavior.

Such robustly attractive properties will count intuitively as our values, as the fourth proposition notes, insofar as they meet two conditions. First, their demands may conflict with the desires we actually experience in this or that situation: they will compete for influence with experiential urges as, in the ancient trope, the spirit competes with the flesh. And second, it will count as a failure on our part if we do not live up to them appropriately in such a conflict; in the genealogy imagined it will undermine our purported status as commissive beings who can securely bet on ourselves to hold and act on certain attitudes.

The commitments we make that identify our values in this way may be made in different contexts, as already noted in the third proposition. Thus, they will vary contextually, depending on whether we speak for our personal attitudes within one or another practice—say, committing to an employer, a friend or a lover—and depending indeed on whether we speak, allegedly without fear of contradiction, for the attitudes of this or that group, committing other members as well as ourselves; the group might be our family, our party, our union, our country—even, at the limit, humanity as a whole.

But as the attitudes to which we commit vary in this manner, so will the values revealed in the commitments, as the fifth proposition holds. As the desires or intentions we avow will be tailored to whether we are speaking for ourselves or different groups, and if for ourselves, within this or that practice, so the values that they reveal will be tailored to such perspectives also. The perspective relevant will be determined in any instance by the background assumptions that shape the commitment. And what counts as a value in one such perspective will not necessarily figure as a value in another.

Finally, to move to the last proposition, what are moral values? Plausibly, they are the values that we will be required to embrace if we are willing to live with one another—indeed with any human beings, local or foreign—without a certain form of rancor or rivalry. We will avoid rancor insofar as we privilege agent-neutral, universal properties that all of us convergently desire: values like peace or fairness or happiness. We will avoid rivalry insofar as we also privilege agent-relative properties that each of us is likely to desire in our own case—say, that we can further our careers, favor our children, keep our promises—and that do not force us, or at least not necessarily force us, to disadvantage others: in that sense, they are concordant, if not convergent concerns. The suggestion is that multi-lateral values in these two categories will determine for us what is morally required or allowed. Insofar as we take the viewpoints of others into account, we will presumably have to conform to their demands, if necessary at a cost to other values of our own; in that sense the moral perspective will enjoy a special status.[8]

2. Assessing the three dogmas of normativity

Suppose that like me you are persuaded that we human beings would be pushed under social pressures to enter the space of normativity if we did not already live in that space. And assume that this suggests a plausible hypothesis: that our actual normative concepts serve the same roles, and have the same referents, that they would have for the protagonists in our counterfactual narrative. Those concepts may not be readily translatable into naturalistic or non-normative counterparts, any more than indexical concepts can be translated into non-indexical terms. But according to the hypothesis, it will at least be naturalistically explicable that we should think in normative terms, as it is non-indexically explicable that we should think in indexical terms. And that explanation in each

case will enable us to know how the world presents when it is cast in such terms; it will give us an entrée to the normative or indexical viewpoint.

Going along with this line of thought, and focusing on actions in particular, we can see why assigning a value to an activity like Xing will count in its favor: it will count in its favor to the extent that it presents Xing as something to do even in the presence of certain contrary inclinations. We can equally see, then, why this may be recast as a claim to the effect that there is a reason to X. Further, we can see how it will make sense to say that one reason is stronger than another, being fit to enable a bearer to win out reliably in relevant conflicts. And finally, we can see how it will often make sense to say that different reasons combine in support of an option and that they may combine to ensure that there is most reason overall to choose that alternative.

If we think of normative reasons on this pattern, then that will dispose us to think well of Ruth Chang's claims. Thus, to take up the first of these, it will prompt us to reject the first dogma and to endorse something close to her claim. It will make little or no sense—at the least, it will be misleading—to say that one option is superior to alternatives, period. The values and reasons invoked in support of such a judgment will typically be associated with one or another perspective, reflecting the practice from which the person is speaking or their presumption to speak in the name of one or another group. And this will be true, even when they declare that the option is morally best or right, for in that case they will be passing judgment from a moral perspective: that is, on the background assumption that only presumptively convergent and concordant values or reasons are allowed to count.

These results support Chang's view that if something is right or good then, in her words, that is relative only to 'covering considerations' such as those, for example, of 'morality, harmony with the ecosystem, or being a basis for a riveting TV documentary' (11). Our terminologies are different, but I think that on this first issue there is no substantive divergence between us.

In response to this first claim, as we have phrased it, someone may say that differences of perspective can be overcome in a process of aggregation. Different practice-centered and group-centered considerations can be put on the same scale, so the response

will go, enabling us to tell which option is best, all things considered, in any choice. This, of course, is the second dogma rejected by Chang. It holds that when we compare two options on the basis of this sort of aggregation, it will always be the case that they are equally good or that one is better or worse than the other; the only alternative will be to say that the options are literally, and implausibly, incomparable.

The naturalistic story about normativity sketched here supports the line taken by Chang when in her second claim she rejects this dogma. While it will certainly make sense to try to compare various alternatives across different perspectives, with each of us often having to decide between two or more options that appeal in different ways, there is no basis for expecting that the value or reasons highlighted in different perspectives will always aggregate to determine their relative overall value. As Chang has forcibly and influentially argued over many years, the best we may be able to say in such a case is that they are 'on a par'; they are comparable with one another but are not determinately equal in value. I can only concur.

Chang's final claim, against the third dogma, is that at least some of the values or reasons that count with us do so, not just because of how the world is, but because of how we are oriented towards the world in what, using the word differently from me, she calls commitment: 'the volitional activity of taking something to be a reason by putting one's very self behind the consideration' (21). Thus, she rejects the dogma according to which 'the ground of a reason or value is never under our direct volitional control'.

The genealogy sketched earlier, as I have argued elsewhere, can support the claim that as we make commitments, we human beings invariably and unintentionally construct a self with which we identify.[9] This is the persona or image that we invite others to rely on in the accumulation of sincere commitments, and that we rely on ourselves in the internal resolutions that mimic commitments. Insofar as our commitments and resolutions reveal the properties we robustly desire—our values—they will of course dictate the ordering of those values. And in that sense they will serve to shape the relative weights we give those values, so that each of us can speak, as Chang speaks, of 'putting one's very self behind' them (21).

Is this to agree with Chang in her rejection of the third dogma? I think not, for two reasons. The first is that the role I give to how we can put our very selves behind the persona we project does not give that investment the same normative role as that of values, contrary to what she suggests in writing of 'will-based' and 'value-based' reasons (21). The second is that it seems inappropriate in any case to describe them as 'will-based'. The fact that we create a self or persona as a byproduct of our independently motivated commitments, does not mean that investment in the self is under our 'volitional control', as she puts it (21). We may willingly, even knowingly, go along with the self we project in our commitments, but that does not imply, as control requires, that we could willingly disinvest in that self, should we wish. And disinvestment, certainly disinvestment at will, is surely not within our capacity. As we may be able to enter a space and not be able to exit, so we may be able to build up a self that shapes our values and not be able to unbuild it.

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[1] See Pettit, P. (2018). The Birth of Ethics: Reconstructing the Role and Nature of Morality. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
[2] Hart, H. L. A. (2012). The Concept of Law, 3rd edition. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
[3] Williams, B. (2002). Truth and Truthfulness. Princeton, Princeton University Press; Queloz, M. (2021). The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genelogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
[4] In a fuller summary, we might add: '7) will hold one another to acting, absent difficulties, on their presumptive values; and 8) will think of the actions expected on that basis as obligations'. See Pettit *ibid*
[5] See Axelrod, R. (1984). The Evolution of Cooperation. New York, Basic Books.
[6] See Brennan, G. and P. Pettit (2004). The Economy of Esteem: An Essay on Civil and Political Society. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
[7] A second kind of commitment is the pledge, appropriate with intentions, that also forecloses the changed-mind excuse that even an avowal would leave open. See Pettit *Ibid*.
[8] As argued in Pettit *Ibid*, this genealogy is consistent with both consequentialism and non-consequentialism. I embrace consequentialism but on independent grounds; for a recent defense, see Pettit, P. (2024). Direct Consequentialism Unlimited. Oxford Handbook of Normative Ethics. D. Copp, C. Rosati and T. Ruli. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
[9] Pettit, P. (2020). "My Three Selves." Philosophy **95**: 363-89.