

# Subjective and Objective Reasons<sup>1</sup>

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198 players, including six quarterbacks, were selected before Tom Brady in the 2000 NFL draft. Those quarterbacks included Southwest Texas State's Spergon Wynn, who posted an abysmal 39.5 rating in 10 games for the Cleveland Browns and the Minnesota Vikings, and Hofstra's Giovanni Carmazzi, who never so much as played a regular-season down for the San Francisco 49ers. Brady, you may know, proved to be one of the greatest quarterbacks in the game's history, posting eye-popping individual stats while leading the New England Patriots to six Super Bowls and four championships.<sup>2</sup> Now consider the question: "Should the 49ers, say, have drafted Brady instead of Carmazzi?"

Some will say, "Yes, of course." Others will answer, "No. Given what anyone could have known at the time, drafting Carmazzi was the smart choice." Still others will say, "Look, there's obviously some sense in which they should have drafted Brady, and some sense in which they were right to draft Carmazzi."

To introduce some terminology: The first answer seems to presume that reasons for action are "objective" — that they depend on how the world actually is or will be, rather than on things like beliefs, evidence, and probabilities regarding how the world is or will be. The second answer seems to rest on the idea that reasons for action are "subjective" — that they depend on beliefs, evidence, or probabilities, rather than on the way things generally are or will be. The third answer expresses the view that there are *both* objective reasons *and* subjective reasons.

The philosophical literature on "subjective and objective reasons" is booming, but it is marked by a schism. Philosophers on one side focus on questions like, "Are reasons (or requirements, or "oughts") objective or are they subjective?"; philosophers on the other side focus on questions like, "How are objective reasons (or requirements, or "oughts") related to subjective reasons (or requirements, or "oughts")?" I'm going to call contributors to the first project "Debaters", since they take there to be a worthwhile *debate* between so-called "objectivists" and so-called "subjectivists" about reasons, and contributors to the second project "Dividers", since they propose to *divide* talk of reasons into talk of subjective reasons and talk of objective reasons.<sup>3</sup> Dividers tend to think that the Debaters' central question occasions a "merely verbal", or "shallow", or "nonsubstantive", or "pointless" dispute. Debaters tend to think that Dividers are avoiding an important, substantive debate and instead trafficking in concepts of derivative importance or dubious connection to reality.

But things are slightly more complicated than just "Debaters vs. Dividers". For one thing, there are different reasons *why* any given Debater or Divider might focus on the question she does. The grounds may be *conceptual*; a Debater might assume that there's a univocal sense of "ought" or "a reason", while a Divider might deny this. Or the grounds may be *metaphysical*; a Divider might assume that there are both subjective and objective reasons, while a Debater might allege that reasons of at least one of these types do not exist. Or the grounds may be specifically *practical*; a Debater might

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<sup>2</sup> [www.pro-football-reference.com](http://www.pro-football-reference.com), accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Dividers include Dorsey (2012), Ewing (1948), Oddie and Menzies (1992), Parfit (2011), Ross (1939), Schroeder (2009), Sepielli (2012), Sidgwick (1874), and Smith (2010). Debaters include Bykvist (ms), Graham (2010), Lord (forthcoming), Mason (2013), Moore (1912), Thomson (2008), and Zimmerman (2009).

acknowledge the existence of both subjective and objective reasons, but think it is in some sense *more important* to answer questions about reasons *simpliciter*, while a Divider might take the view that even if, say, subjective reasons do not exist, they are in some sense a convenient fiction, and as such, worth theorizing about.

Secondly, it is possible to be more or less extreme of a Divider about any given normative notion. A less extreme Divider will urge a distinction between objective and subjective reasons, but see it as a serious question whether the latter depend, e.g., on an agent's beliefs or instead on her evidence. A more extreme Divider may say that we ought to jettison talk of subjective reasons *tout court* in favor of talk of belief-relative reasons, credence-relative reasons, evidence-relative reasons, rational-belief-relative reasons, and so on.

Third, one may be a Divider about some normative notions and a Debater about others. As we will see, one reasonable stance distinguishes between objective reasons and subjective reasons, but sees merit in straightforward debates about what we are *obligated* to do.

Very little has been written on the comparative merits of the Debater and Divider projects. At first glance, this is surprising. Here we have the same kind of issue being approached through two different frameworks, with the adherents of each framework aware of the other, and with each framework such that if it is a sound way to approach the issue, the other framework is apparently not. Why, then, has this cold war not heated up? Well, a Debater or Divider submitting an article to a journal is not going to get very far by sticking her main argument behind a lengthy defense of the legitimacy of her project. For better or worse, the "let a thousand flowers bloom" culture of contemporary philosophy enables cold wars to drag on. Nor are meta-ethicists apt to take up arms for one side against the other. Meta-ethics tends to focus on normative concepts and properties generally rather than on specifically subjective or objective normative concepts and properties. So I thought the best use of an article like this would be to discuss what's largely missing from the literature but on the minds of many of its contributors: Which of these divergent streams of inquiry is tackling the issues correctly?

Of the many considerations that may be marshalled for either side, I want to focus on two. First, appeals are made on both sides to the action-guiding role we want concepts like that of a reason to play. Dividers will typically say that in guiding our actions by norms, we appeal to both subjective and objective reasons; Debaters will typically say that we can guide our actions by norms if and only if there is one primary or "practical" notion of a reason. We will spend some time, then, on the question of which notion(s) of a reason we must employ to guide our actions. Second, the notion of a "nonsubstantive" dispute looms large in the Debater vs. Divider standoff. If questions about reasons *simpliciter* are non-substantive, then Dividerism seems to be the way to go. But if such questions are substantive, then it would seem that Debaters are asking the really important question. With metaphilosophy all the rage these days, there are no shortages of approaches to the question of when some philosophical question is non-substantive. I will see how some of these bear on the clash between Debaters and Dividers.

### *Action Guidance*

Facts about the action-guiding roles of normative concepts may seem to lend greater support to the Dividers than to the Debaters. For it seems that we employ both objective and subjective normative notions to guide our actions — the former when we are certain, and the latter when we are uncertain, about the relevant facts. Suppose you are sure that stopping for coffee will make you late for a meeting, and wonder what you should do. The notion of "should" at play here seems to be the objective one. You are implicitly asking yourself, "What should I do *given that* the world is such that stopping for coffee and being on time are mutually exclusive?" (Some may describe you as implicitly asking, "What should

I do given that *I believe that* stopping for coffee and being on time are mutually exclusive?" But this is as implausible as the idea that we append "I believe" to every premise in our *theoretical* reasoning. And even if we occasionally ask ourselves what to do given what we believe, the answer has practical force for us only because, from our perspective, what we believe is the case *is* the case. Otherwise, conclusions about what to do given your beliefs would be as practically impotent for you as would be conclusions about what to do given, say, your neighbor's beliefs.)

But now suppose that you are unsure whether stopping for coffee will make you late, and you wonder what you should do. Here, the notion of should at play seems to be a more subjective one. You are wondering what to do, given that there's some chance that stopping for coffee and being on time are mutually exclusive.<sup>4</sup> It bears mentioning what notion of "chance" is used here. Some may say it is subjective probability, i.e. degree-of-belief. But this doesn't seem quite right. If someone who is certain doesn't ask herself what to do given her beliefs, why would someone who is uncertain ask herself what to do given her *degrees* of belief? Why would uncertainty cause you to assign practical significance to your own mind? It is better to think of things like this: When I have a full belief that P, I ask myself, "What should I do given that P"? "P" here does not *report* my full belief that P; it *expresses* it. So if we want to know how I reason when I'm uncertain whether P, we need to know what expresses uncertainty — what stands to a degree of belief that P as "P" stands to the belief that P. Several recent writers have argued that what plays this role is an "epistemic probability" statement, which is to be distinguished from an objective probability, or an evidential probability, or of course a subjective probability statement. These writers have further converged an expressivistic meta-semantic treatment for such statements.<sup>5</sup> When I have a degree of belief of .7 in some relevant P, then, I ask myself: "What should I do given that there's a .7 [epistemic] probability that P?"

That we use both objective and subjective "shoulds" in guiding our actions would seem to lend at least some support to the Dividers' view: there are subjective reasons and objective reasons, and the really important question in the neighborhood is how to understand the former in terms of the latter, or the latter in terms of the former.

But several replies are open to the Debater:

(1) Right off the bat, he will point out that these considerations support, at most, Divider-ism about *some* normative notions. An agent needn't suppose that reasons, obligations, rightness, and wrongness *all* come in objective and subjective flavors. She can guide all of her actions, whether under certainty or uncertainty,<sup>6</sup> using only a subjective "ought" and an objective "ought". So we can simply be Dividers about "ought" and Debaters about everything else.

(2) An "objectivist" Debater may deny that we need to appeal to subjective notions to guide our actions, even under uncertainty. All we need, she'll say, are objective notions, plus the practical concept of an

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<sup>4</sup> By "uncertainty" here, we mean "*occurrent* uncertainty", not merely "*dispositional* uncertainty". For I can guide my behavior by objective norms if I am *occurrently* certain of the relevant propositions at the time of the action, even if I am *disposed* to become *occurrently* uncertain under other conditions — e.g. being asked to bet my life on their truth, being asked if I am certain of them, and so on. Suppose I am running through the day's plans in my head. I think to myself, "Okay, the bus leaves at 4:45, so I ought (objectively) to leave for the bus stop at 4:15", and then I guide my leaving at 4:15 by this thought. This is a case of guidance by objective norms, notwithstanding the fact that I would express less than complete certainty that the bus will leave at 4:45 were I asked. This ends up being important later.

<sup>5</sup> See Moss (2013), Swanson (2009), and Yalcin (2007).

<sup>6</sup> It is possible to read the claim that someone acted "under uncertainty" as implying that the premises in that person's practical reasoning included propositions about her own uncertainty. We've already seen that this would be a distorted picture of reasoning under uncertainty. I use "she acted under uncertainty", or for that matter, "she acted in the face of uncertainty", as equivalent in meaning to "she acted while uncertain about the relevant matters".

attempt or try. An uncertain agent may ask himself (albeit stiltedly), "Which action would be my best try at doing what I have objective reason to do?" — just as he may ask himself, "Which investment strategy would constitute my best attempt at making money?" — and guide himself by the answer. One no more needs the notion of a subjective reason, or subjective "ought", than one needs the concept of "subjective money".

This reply only works, however, if the Divider takes the notion of the subjective "ought" to be something other than the notion of just such a try. But she needn't, and I think shouldn't. In other work, I argue that we can define what I subjectively ought to do as my best try at doing what I have objective reason to do.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, I argue that this is the only satisfactory definition of a subjective normative notion in terms of an objective one. To ask oneself what is one's best try at doing what one has objective reason to do is simply to ask what one subjectively ought to do, only in different words.

(3) Additionally, the Debater may argue that considerations of action-guidance support nothing stronger than the conceptual claim that there are both subjective and objective normative notions. This is consistent with either subjective or objective reasons being mere fictions that we cannot help but employ. For consider an analogy: a skeptic about free will may allow, with Kant, that we cannot help but act under "the idea of a free will", but then deny that this provides any reason to believe in free will. From the perspective of both the Debater and the free will skeptic, the move from "we cannot help but accept X" to "X exists" elides the distinction between the natural necessity of the "cannot" in the premise and the normative necessity of the sort of "cannot" that would be required to warrant the conclusion.

Now, it's worth keeping in mind that the same kind of reply is available against the *Debater* who wants to use action-guidance to support her view. It is a general objection to arguments from practical ineliminability. So this reply cannot help the Debater except by perhaps cancelling out what would otherwise be a point in his opponent's favor.

But the Divider can say more than that. She can take the view that guidance considerations support not only her conceptual claim, but what I'd earlier called her "practical" claim as well — and that they do so even if there are no such thing as subjective rightness. For if subjective rightness is a fiction, then it is at least a *useful* fiction; when we are uncertain, we can only purposefully bring our conduct into line with what objective reasons require *by* reasoning that invokes the notion of subjective rightness (which, again, we should think of in terms of the notion of an attempt, or try). This would seem to vindicate the value of such reasoning, and by extension, of the Dividers' philosophical theorizing about how subjective rightness links up with objective reasons.

At this point, though, we might start to wonder why we shouldn't just admit that subjective rightness exists along with the objective rightness. We've established that its concept exists, and is useful. Many of our intuitions support its existence — notably, the intuition that one oughtn't to act recklessly as such. The intuitive support grows once we start thinking of subjective rightness in terms of trying. For are we really going to deny that there's such a thing as a *best try* at doing what one has objective reason to do, or that what counts as the best try here depends, as the quality of a try does elsewhere, on probabilities? Of course meta-ethics is full of arguments that our ordinary moral judgments are not to be trusted, but all such arguments that I know of apply to reasons and rightness generally, not to subjective rightness specifically.

(4) A Debater might also reply not by rejecting subjective or objective normativity, but by urging that an additional, specifically "practical" sort of normativity is the one most crucial to the guidance of action. And since this role is so important, the debate over what we practically ought to do should take

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<sup>7</sup> Sepielli (2012).

precedence over less significant debates about what we subjectively or objectively ought to do. The Debater might even say that it's this practical sense of "ought" that we're employing when we ask the straightforward question of what we ought *simpliciter* to do.

Now, there is a sense in which even Divider can accept facts about what we ought in this sense to do. He can simply identify the concept of the practical "ought" (in a context of action) with the concept of just whatever "ought" is used in practical reasoning (in that context), and say that the objective ought is the practical ought in contexts of certainty and the subjective ought is the practical ought in contexts of uncertainty. This is obviously not what the Debater has in mind.

So what does he have in mind? Perhaps it that, *contra* the Divider's suggestion, we cannot guide our actions under *either* certainty or uncertainty by *either* objective or subjective notions — that instead, she must employ in all contexts a specifically "practical" notion that cannot be identified with either the subjective or objective one. What motivates this suggestion is that, unless there is a practical "ought" to arbitrate between or supercede the subjective and objective "oughts", the agent she will face "deontic dilemmas" in cases where subjective normativity points one way and objective normativity points another.

But we need to be careful here. That subjective and objective reasons can favor different actions does not mean that they can appear do so *from the agent's perspective*. Of course, we are familiar with cases in which reasons may be opposed from an agent's point of view just as they may be opposed in reality. Moral reasons may favor being on time for my meeting with the student while prudential reasons favor grabbing a coffee first, and so it may seem from the my perspective as the agent. But I shall want to claim that there can never appear, from the perspective of the agent, to be a truly practical conflict between subjective and objective reasons.

For suppose I am sure that I objectively ought to do A. Then the question of what I subjectively ought to do need never arise for me. I can simply guide my behavior by my objective "ought"-thought. And if for whatever reason I do ask myself what I subjectively ought to do, my answer cannot, on pain of obvious incoherence, be anything other than "A". So no conflict from my perspective here.

And now suppose I am uncertain whether I objectively ought to do A or to do B. Then I can't guide myself by my objective "ought"-thoughts. They don't "point" me towards either action. This means that if I then go on to form a view about what I subjectively ought to do, that view will guide me. No conflict from my perspective here, either.

We might say that subjective reasons are "transparent" to objective ones from the subject's perspective, just as (and because) a good try is transparent to a well-executed action, and just as my believing that P is transparent to P.<sup>8</sup> So it seems that agents will simply never take themselves to face "deontic dilemmas" between subjective and objective reasons, notwithstanding the fact that these two kinds of reasons may come apart in reality.

But the Debater has a rejoinder. There are some cases in which subjective "ought"-questions arise for an agent despite her being certain in some way about certain crucial objective "ought"-questions. These are so-called "mineshaft" or "Jackson" cases. Here is Frank Jackson's original example:

Jill is a physician who has to decide on the correct treatment for her patient, John, who has a minor but not trivial skin complaint. She has three drugs to choose from: drug A, drug B, and drug C. Careful consideration of the literature has led her to the following opinions. Drug A is very likely to relieve the condition but will not completely cure it. One of the drugs B and C will completely cure the skin condition; the other though will kill the patient, and there is no way that she can tell which of the two is the perfect cure

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow the language of transparency from Moran (2001).

and which the killer drug.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, Jill is uncertain about some objective normative claims; that is why the subjective "ought"-question arises for her in the first place. Notably, she is uncertain whether she objectively ought to prescribe Drug B or ought to prescribe Drug C, and unsure whether the ranking of the candidate actions in terms of objective value is {Prescribe B, Prescribe A, Prescribe C} or {Prescribe B, Prescribe A, Prescribe C}.

She is, however, certain that she objectively oughtn't to prescribe A, and that she objectively ought to prescribe B or objectively ought to prescribe C. Furthermore, we may say she is certain that she subjectively ought to prescribe A. So doesn't she face what she regards as a deontic conflict, with objective reasons pointing away from A and either toward B or toward C, and subjective reasons pointing toward A? And won't she face a further question of what she ought to do in light of this conflict — one that is answerable only in terms of a specifically practical "ought" that is distinct from either the subjective or the objective one?<sup>10</sup>

Well, that's not what *my* phenomenology suggests. I imagine myself in Jill's circumstances asking what to do, not getting an answer, asking myself what to do given that it's unclear what I ought to do, getting an answer ("Prescribe A"), and then just doing that action in a way that seems fully guided and intelligible and in no way "alien". There is simply no need for any further "arbitration". If called upon to justify *why* I stop there and act, I would say something like this: Subjective normative questions are about how best to take into account the various ways the world *might* be *vis a vis* what is objectively significant — in this case, the patient's health. In saying that I subjectively ought to prescribe A, I've already taken into account that it's certainly not the best for the patient's health, but have judged that, from the point of view of the patient's health, that fact is not dispositive. There is no serious question whether to "go with" subjective or objective normativity, even in Jackson cases, for to make a judgment about what I subjectively ought to do is to have already implicitly stripped any contrary objective normative judgments of anything more than *pro tanto* force from my perspective.

I like to think about this issue in terms of the structural analogy John Broome draws between choices under uncertainty (where value is spread out over epistemically possible worlds), and questions of distribution (where value is spread out over subjects).<sup>11</sup> To say that one certainly objectively oughtn't to do A is to say that there is no way the world might be in which A is what one objectively ought to do, which is analogous to saying that there is no person in a population for whom D is the distribution of goods that provides the greatest well-being. To say that, nonetheless, one subjectively ought to do A is to say that A is the action that best takes into account what is objectively valuable, spread out over all the ways the world might be. This is analogous to saying that D is the distribution of goods that best takes into account each person's interests — in other words, that it is the *just* distribution. But we do not, in making choices about how to allocate resources, regard there as being a serious "dispute" that must first be settled when the just distribution is not the "top choice" of anyone in the population. To call a distribution "just" is to have already settled the relevant allocatory question in favor of that distribution.

(5) Finally, the Debater might try to show that making too much of "guidance" considerations puts us on a path to error. For just as we may be uncertain about ordinary factual claims, we may be uncertain about moral ones. The Divider, as we've been representing her so far, will want to say that we can guide our actions under moral uncertainty only by norms that are appropriately sensitive to it. And this, in

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<sup>9</sup> Jackson (1991)

<sup>10</sup> See Bykvist (ms), Kiesewetter (2013), Lord (forthcoming), and Zimmerman (2009) for this point.

<sup>11</sup> Broome (1991).

turn, would commit her to the view that some of these norms are correct, or at least good to accept.

But isn't this counterintuitive? For suppose Cain's credences are exhaustively distributed over evil moral theories. A norm that is sensitive to these credences would almost surely prescribe an evil action. But of course, it is obviously false to say that anyone ought to do an evil action, and so we should reject either the Divider's psychological claim about guidance under uncertainty or her normative claim about its relevance to what one ought to do.<sup>12</sup>

The most effective response to this objection relies on our earlier point about epistemic probabilities. *Contra* the objector, a person when acting under uncertainty does not employ an "ought" that is relative to that uncertainty, any more than she uses a belief-relative "ought" when acting under full belief. Instead, she uses an "ought" that is relative to epistemic probabilities — statements of which *express* rather than *report* credences — and so thus far the Divider is committed only to epistemic-probability-relative "oughts". The Divider may say of Cain: "Of course he oughtn't, in the sense relevant to action-guidance under uncertainty, to do objectively evil acts; the epistemic probabilities of moral theories that sanction such acts is almost *nil* [the Divider says, expressing *her own* credences]. I know that *Cain*, expressing his credences, says they're high. But he's just wrong."

The Debater can push further, however. For just as we may be uncertain about ordinary facts and moral claims, we may be uncertain about what to do in the face of uncertainty about moral claims, and uncertain about what to do in the face of *that* uncertainty, and so on. Presumably we need "oughts" to guide our action under uncertainty at all of these levels. This opens the Divider up to two objections.

The first is the "inconsistency" objection. Suppose that you are uncertain between utilitarianism and contractualism. It is natural to say that what is subjectively right is determined by the epistemic probabilities of these two theories, in accordance with the correct theory of what to do under moral uncertainty (call it "T1"). But now suppose you are uncertain between T1 and some competing theory, T2. Then it is tempting to say that what is subjectively right is determined by the epistemic probabilities of T1 and T2, in accordance with the correct theory of what to do under *that* uncertainty. But the subjectively right action as determined in the first way needn't be the same as the subjectively right action as determined in the second way. So it would seem that subjective normativity is inconsistent. The problem, put sloganistically, is that there is some tension, revealed in cases of multi-level normative uncertainty, between the idea that subjective normativity can be genuinely *subjective* and the idea that it can be genuinely *normative*.

The second is the "regress" objection: We can imagine someone who is not only uncertain at both the "levels" just mentioned, but indeed, uncertain at *all* levels. Indeed, one would suspect that this blanket uncertainty is typical. For who among us is certain about *morality*, let alone such esoterica as 8th-order, or 1000th-order, normative uncertainty? But recall what animated our Divider in the first place: that we cannot guide our behavior by norms about which we are uncertain. It would seem to follow from this that someone who is uncertain "all the way up" will be unable to guide her behavior by norms at all. This is a problem for the Divider. Her ground for positing subjective reasons was that practical thought in terms of such reasons helps with the guidance of action. But now it's starting to look like it doesn't help after all.<sup>13</sup>

I give a response to the "inconsistency" objection in my paper "What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do...".<sup>14</sup> The part of the paper that matters here

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<sup>12</sup> See Harman (forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup> See Weatherson (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Sepielli (2014a).

can be summarized as follows: There can be many different *orders* of the sorts of subjective reasons that are relevant to action-guidance. First-order ones depend on epistemic probabilities regarding what I have objective reason to do. Second-order ones depend on epistemic probabilities regarding the first-order ones. And so on for third-order ones and second-order ones, etc. There is no more inconsistency in saying that I have most third-order subjective reason to do one thing and most second-order subjective reason to do another than in saying that I have most subjective reason (of whatever order) to do one thing and most objective reason to do another.

Nor must we say that there is something that there is most subjective reason "overall" to do. We can allow that the different levels are incomparable. This is because each order is "transparent" to the one below it, just as first-order subjective reasons are, as I argued above, transparent to objective ones: If I am certain about what I Nth order subjectively ought to do, questions of N+1th order subjective normativity will never arise, and so I cannot face what I regard as an inter-level conflict. On the other hand, if I am uncertain what I Nth order subjectively ought to do, then I cannot guide my behavior by subjective norms of this order, and so I will see no conflict here, either. Again, we can make sense of this by thinking of subjective normativity in terms of trying. Just as what I (first-order) subjectively ought to do is my best try at doing what I have objective reason to do, what I second-order subjectively ought to do is my best try at doing what I have first-order objective reason to do. But one never faces what one regards as the choice between doing A well and giving one's best try at doing A.

The "regress" objection is trickier. It helps a bit to recall that it is only under occurrent uncertainty that we need to resort to subjective norms. This means that one way for the regress to stop is for the agent to cease to be occurrently uncertain of the relevant norms despite being dispositionally uncertain of them. And of course there are many, many things of which we are dispositionally uncertain but not occurrently uncertain. Some speculative social science: plenty of people wonder about what to do under uncertainty; as far as I know, nobody is sitting in stasis, hoping in vain (or rather, having vain hopes crop up in her mind!) for certainty about what she 242nd-order subjectively ought to do.

However, this is not a completely satisfactory answer. For if this is our story about how the regress stops and guided action becomes possible, it is unclear why there is any value to engaging in guided action as opposed to simply taking an unguided "leap of faith" in the face of occurrent uncertainty. The difference between a norm-guided action and a leap of faith becomes merely psychological: dispositional uncertainty gives rise to conscious uncertainty in one case, and yet I act (a leap of faith); dispositional uncertainty *fails* to give rise to conscious uncertainty in the other case, *and so* I act (the regress stops). But normatively speaking, it is difficult to distinguish between leaps of faith and guided actions; in both cases, the agent is behaving in a way that is not completely responsive to her underlying, dispositional uncertainty. That her action *feels* more intelligible in one case than in the other is irrelevant.

If the leap/guidance distinction is not, as such, of any normative significance, then why should the fact that we employ subjective "oughts" to guide some of our actions make us think that there are subjective "ought"-facts, or that it is good to theorize and deliberate as though there were? We don't generally think that the essentiality of a concept to a worthless practice speaks in favor of that concept.

In a short piece for *The Philosophers' Magazine*,<sup>15</sup> I gesture at a response: The advantage of subjective "oughts" is that they enable us to *forestall* action under dispositional uncertainty, even if they cannot eliminate it. It is better, in a certain sense and *ceteris paribus*, to employ an "ought" that is relative to epistemic probabilities of views about about what to do in the face of moral uncertainty than to employ one that is relative to epistemic probabilities of moral views themselves, better still to employ an "ought" that is relative to epistemic probabilities of views about what to do in the face of uncertainty

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<sup>15</sup> Sepielli (2014b).



about what to do in the face of moral uncertainty, and so on. But I should emphasize that this response is still at an early stage of development. I am unaware of any other replies to the “regress” objection.

### *Nonsubstantive Disputes*

There is a tendency among Dividers to see Debaters as engaging in disputes that are silly, not in good order, nonsubstantive. If they are right, then of course this is to the Debaters' discredit. But if they are wrong, then this is obviously to their own discredit, for then they would be turning away from the good question of what we have reason *simpliciter* to do in favor of questions of subsidiary importance.

What might the charge of “nonsubstantiveness” amount to? Perhaps the idea is that “objectivism vs. subjectivism” disputes are really instances of people talking past each other — of the subjectivist employing one “ought” (i.e. the subjective one) and the objectivist employing another “ought” (i.e. the objective one).<sup>16</sup>

The Debaters' first line of defense should be to appeal to the behavior of competent speakers. Presumably the philosophers engaged in these disputes are competent speakers of (let us say) the English language. What's more, they are reflective about the concepts they use — in the habit of rooting out differences without distinctions and distinctions without differences. Finally, they are aware that other philosophers (i.e. some Dividers) say that they are merely talking past each other, which should be enough to render this possibility salient. And yet, it does not seem to them that they are merely talking past one another. This is some evidence that they indeed are not.

The Dividers may respond that talking past someone can sometimes feel like disagreeing with her, even for the reflective speaker. There are at least two ways for such a confusion to arise. Perhaps the two sides are using different “ought” or “obligation” concepts, but their insistent use of those concepts is attributable to an unexpressed difference of opinion about which of the concepts is more important, about which one we should care about. Or perhaps their verbal behavior is attributable to an unexpressed semantic dispute — about which of their two notions the word “obligation” stands for. In either case, since their exchange has the surface appearance of a disagreement, and indeed is *attributable* to a difference of opinion of some sort or other, it is not hard to see how they might think they are really disagreeing when in fact they are not.

This reply would be stronger, perhaps, if we could use these very debunking explanations to convince disputants like these that they really are talking past one another. But it is not clear that we could. Again, we are dealing with very reflective philosophers here, who presumably all know about these alternative interpretations of what's going on in their in-house discussions.

But there are subtler versions of the charge that “objectivist vs. subjectivist” debates are nonsubstantive.

In the “metametaphysics literature”, Karen Bennett presses an “epistemicist” version of the nonsubstantivity charge against certain metaphysical disputes. In these, so-called “difference-minimizing” disputes, each side so effectively captures what the other side initially takes to be evidence that we are left with no grounds upon which to adjudicate the matter one way or the other. So even if there is a right answer to, say, the “Special Composition Question”, we have no way of knowing what it is. An similarly epistemicist position about “subjective vs. objective” debates would hold that participants are genuinely disagreeing about what one ought, *simpliciter*, to do, but that there is no way for any of them to gain and hold dialectical ground. It would seem to be incumbent upon an epistemicist to explain why the kinds of arguments given in “subjectivist vs. objectivist” disputes — e.g. “Objectivism is true, for otherwise our obligations would change as subjects' beliefs change or as new

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<sup>16</sup> See Ross (1939). On “merely verbal” disputes generally, see Chalmers (2011) and Jenkins (2014).

evidence comes in"<sup>17</sup>; "Objectivism is false, for it implies in 'Jackson' cases that a morally conscientious person will knowingly do wrong"<sup>18</sup> — are epistemically feeble in a way that the arguments given in, say, the "utilitarianism vs. deontology" debate are not. For anyone, even the most ardent moral skeptic, should admit that the latter debate is at least substantive.

Now, as Bennett acknowledges, the arguments in her paper equally well support the anti-realist view that the reason why cannot find answers to certain metaphysical questions is that those questions don't *have* right answers.<sup>19</sup> So let us turn to this second view as it applies to "subjectivist vs. objectivist" disputes. The most extreme version holds there are no determinately correct answers to such disputes because there are no determinately correct answers to *any* normative questions. But that's going a bit far. A less extreme theory about rightness *simpliciter* might say: In cases where beliefs, evidence, and reality all line up, there can be determine truths of what it is right *simpliciter* to do. It would, for instance, be right for Dr. Jill to prescribe a drug she *knows* would cure the patient. But in cases where beliefs, evidence, and reality don't line up, there are no determinate truths about what it's right *simpliciter* to do. These are cases to which there is no uniquely correct projection of the concept 'right' — cases where, we might say, "'right' goes on holiday".<sup>20</sup>

Let us consider one last way of spinning the charge of nonsubstantivity. One sometimes hears the claim that we "could say" of someone who unknowingly harms another that he did wrong, but that we also "could say" that he did not do wrong. Now, one reason we could say either is that neither is favored by the evidence; another reason we could say either is that there is no fact of the matter which is true. We have already covered these reasons. But perhaps we should read this locution instead as expressing the idea that we could use our words to stand for different concepts than they presently stand for. So even if there is a knowably correct answer to the straightforward question of whether the aforementioned character did wrong, we "could say" either "He did wrong" or "He did not do wrong" just in the sense that we could jettison the concept of wrong altogether and instead use "wrong" to stand for either objective wrongness or subjective wrongness.

Of course there is some sense in which I am permitted to use or not use any concept. But we wouldn't want to say that all debates are nonsubstantive. We avoid this result by saying that there are some concepts that I must use on pain of being worse off in some respect, but others that I can give up costlessly. Concepts in the first category may include those of force, charge, pain, and action. Concepts in the second category presumably include those of grue, bleen, drug, post-punk, and — to use one of Karen Bennett's examples — martini. Suppose there is a knowable fact of the matter whether a so-called "vodka martini" is a martini. We may still think a debate about this is shallow, since we could, without any apparent cost, simply switch to using "martini" to express a broader concept, martini\*, under which determinately falls the vodka variant.

But what sort of "cost" is this? "Worse off" how? There are, broadly speaking, two answers. One is the metaphysical realist, or "structuralist" answer, recently defended by Ted Sider:<sup>21</sup> Some concepts carve nature at the joints, limn its fundamental structure; others do not. We can fail to get the world entirely right not only by misapplying concepts, but by failing to use these privileged ones. By contrast,

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<sup>17</sup> See Ross (1939) and Graham (2010).

<sup>18</sup> See Zimmerman (2009).

<sup>19</sup> For a defense of this view, see Thomasson (2009).

<sup>20</sup> See Wittgenstein (1953). For examples from the history of mathematics, plus the idea that there may be substantive debates about how to "expand" concepts past their (present) senses, see Buzaglo (2002).

<sup>21</sup> Sider (2011).

other concepts fail to carve nature at the joints. We capture the world less successfully when we misapply these, but not when we fail to use them in the first place. To be sure, it is not obvious whether structuralism is true, let alone whether any normative concept corresponds to nature's structure. But let us suppose for exploration's sake that the concept of, say, moral rightness does not correspond to it. Then the Divider might put her nonsubstantivity charge as follows: "Look, let's suppose the 'objectivist' about rightness is correct. What's to stop those with subjectivist inclinations from saying: 'Keep the concept of right for all I care. I'll simply use 'right' to express another concept, right\*, which applies to actions in virtue of credences or beliefs or epistemic probabilities.'? Well, if right doesn't carve at the joints, the answer is 'nothing — or, nothing about about the nature of reality, at least'. But then the debate starts to look a bit silly. We could hardly imagine a party to a biological debate saying 'Keep the concept Golgi apparatus for all I care...'"

The other answer to "worse how?" is the "pragmatist" answer: It would be worse in the straightforward sense of making it more difficult for us to pursue the good and avoid the bad were we to jettison certain classes of concepts. Which concepts are privileged in this sense? Concepts that are constitutively linked to experience, perhaps. Or maybe concepts that figure in scientific laws. By contrast, our replacement of martini with martini\* would have virtually no impact.

At this point, some Debaters will be ready to pounce. They'll say that if any concepts are practically crucial, *practical* concepts like ought and right and obligation are. Suppose we replaced right, which, let's say, has thrill-killing in its anti-extension, with right\* — a concept with the same action-guiding role but that has thrill-killing in its extension. No person who values human life could look upon such a replacement with equanimity. There is no hope, then, of classing "subjectivist vs. objectivist" debates as nonsubstantive on the grounds that the concepts involved are, from this pragmatist perspective, optional.

But the Divider has a rejoinder. She can say: "Look, this isn't like these other debates. It matters whether I do what's right or what's right\*; I'll probably thrill-kill one way and won't the other. But it wouldn't matter whether I used "rightness *simpliciter*" to express a concept that I took to have objectively right actions in its extension, or one that I took to have subjectively right ones in its extension. Either way, I'll guide my actions under certainty by objective norms and those under uncertainty by subjective norms, and that's that. Given what we said in the previous section, it's practically irrelevant what concept I use this "rightness *simpliciter*" to express: any such concept will be a idle wheel, practically speaking.

The Debater may now reply that this focus on action-guidance is too narrow. The application of normative concepts can bear on what to do in other, less direct ways. If I think my past action was wrong, I may apologize or offer recompense; if I think it wasn't, I won't. If I think you are in the wrong in using force against Edna, I will try to stop you; if I think you are in the right, I won't. If I think that Edna acted well throughout her life, I will hold my tongue when asked about her amateurish poetry; if I don't, I won't. In all of these cases, we can imagine objectivists about rightness *simpliciter* acting differently than subjectivists about rightness *simpliciter*. For while my present beliefs and my present evidence cannot, from my present self's perspective, come apart from the way the world is, the beliefs and evidence of other selves may. Of course, Dividers may make their characteristic move: "Edna acted well in one sense, but not so well in another", and so on. But here the Debater may reply that it is rightness *simpliciter* that grounds the propriety of apology, third-party intervention, and tongue-holding. (She may say so because she simply defines the tout court normative notions as those that play such

grounding roles; she may also say so as a more substantive thesis).<sup>22</sup>

This emphasis on normative concepts' indirectly roles is bound to prompt an eliminativist reply from at least some Dividers: "We saw that we can guide our actions by employing only the objective and subjective senses of "ought". So why not just talk about who we ought, in these action-guiding senses, to compensate, use force against, and so on? Can't we see these *tout court* notions as merely optional way-stations on the inferential route from non-normative thoughts to action-guiding conclusions?" This recalls what some are inclined to say about the "free will" debate: "Let's just have 'compatibilist free will' and 'incompatibilist free will', and then call the whole thing off." Parties to this debate will reply: "Yes, that would be fine if free will were not so intimately connected with important things like punishment, blame, and so forth. But it is." But this will prompt the retort: "No doubt these are important practical questions. But then why talk about free will at all? Why not just cut to the chase and talk about who we should punish and who we should blame, and cast the rest of this to the flames?"

It should be clear that we are now squarely in the realm of substantive normative ethics, focused as we are on what the propriety of various practices and attitudes depends on. These questions will have to be addressed elsewhere.

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<sup>22</sup> It is my experience that Divider-ism is more common in ethics and Debater-ism more common in epistemology. (But see Alston (2005) for a defense of Divider-ism in epistemology.) Perhaps this is because so much epistemic evaluation seems to be geared towards such things as "epistemic blameworthiness", while ethical evaluation is geared to a greater extent toward the guidance of action. And as we've seen, the Debaters' debates are arguably highly relevant to the former, and probably not directly relevant to the latter. For a different explanation of the same sociological phenomenon, see Feldman (1988).

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