IS DEONTIC EVALUATION CAPABLE OF DOING WHAT IT IS FOR?

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MANY PHILOSOPHERS think the function of deontic evaluation, unlike the functions of other kinds of evaluative judgment, is to guide action. The idea is often put in terms of the *point* of deontic evaluation; guiding action is what deontic evaluation is *for*, or what it *aims* at. To explain: although non-deontic evaluative judgment and its corresponding concepts, such as GOOD and BAD, serve to guide our evaluative thinking about the world, *deontic* evaluation and its corresponding concepts, such as RIGHT, WRONG, and OBLIGATORY, serve to guide our evaluative thinking *in order to guide action*.[1] And it is not supposed to be an accident that deontic evaluation plays this role in our evaluative thought and talk, in the way it is an accident that coffee mugs play the role of holding plants in one's office. (The mugs were handy, the concepts were handy.) Instead, guiding action is precisely what deontic evaluation is in the *business* of doing. Here is Holly Smith:

> Can natural events, such as rainstorms or late frosts, be right? No: we say that such events and states can be *good*, but not that they can be *right*. The reason for this is that such entities are not voluntary—they are not the objects of effective *choice*. . . . Rightness is reserved for entities, namely acts, that are controllable by choosing agents.[2]

Smith's suggestion is that the objects of deontic evaluation exhibit a certain unity, in that only entities "controllable by choosing agents"—in other words, actions—can properly fall under the concepts of RIGHT, WRONG, or OBLIGATORY.[3] Granting that the objects of deontic evaluation exhibit this unity, we might wonder *why* this is so. Smith, again:

1   We adopt the convention of using small capitals to refer to concepts.
2   Smith, "Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts," 342.
3   Two remarks: First, there might be entities other than actions that are controllable by choosing agents. For instance, perhaps some range of (propositional) attitudes, or emotions, are controllable by choosing agents. For present purposes, this does not matter. We

> The obvious answer is that the criterion for rightness provides the kind of evaluation of choosable events which can form the basis for *guiding* choices with respect to those events. *It is precisely because we need some standard of evaluation to serve this function that we have criteria of rightness in addition to criteria of goodness.*[4]

In a similar context, Eric Wiland makes the same point: "Your actions are … under your control, and it is *because* of this that the concepts of RIGHT and WRONG have application" to your actions, and to nothing but your actions.[5] Other philosophers accept similar explanations.[6] It is important to note that these suggestions are not offered as merely possible explanations, but rather as the *best* explanation of why actions are the only thing that can properly be evaluated in deontic terms. If this is indeed the best explanation of the unity exhibited by the objects of deontic evaluation, we can go on to infer that providing guidance with respect to actions is the point or purpose of deontic evaluation, or, as Wiland puts it, "the point of morality."[7] Going forward, to fix terms, we will say that the *function* of deontic evaluation is to guide action, and we will refer to this claim as "Guidance Function."

It is possible to object at this point. This argument for Guidance Function looks a lot like walking into someone's office, noticing that all of their coffee mugs contain house plants, and concluding, on these grounds, that housing plants is the function of coffee mugs. But that is unfair. The coffee mug argument is not suitably general; if you walk into the kitchen, say, you will also see coffee mugs being used to house creamers, sugar, and stirrers, to take up space in the sink, and even, in rare cases, to house coffee. Here, the idea is that the *only* thing we ever discover deontic evaluation being used to do is apply to, and thereby guide, actions (house coffee). Our situation with respect to deontic evaluation is thus meant to be akin to an anthropologist who discovers, of some tribe's artifact, that members of the tribe only ever use that artifact to dig up roots. It would be reasonable to conclude, on that basis, that the function of the artifact is *digging*

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will focus here on the case of actions. Second, the myriad issues concerning what it takes for an entity to be "controllable" in the relevant sense will not matter to our arguments, so we will ignore them in what follows.

4   Smith, "Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts," 342–43, second emphasis added.

5   Wiland, "How Indirect Can Indirect Utilitarianism Be?" 292; emphasis in original and small capitals added.

6   Carlson, "Deliberation, Foreknowledge, and Morality as a Guide to Action"; Bykvist, "Violations of Normative Invariance."

7   Wiland, "How Indirect Can Indirect Utilitarianism Be?" 292.

up roots. Similarly, it is reasonable to conclude that the function of deontic evaluation, given its actual restricted domain of application, is to guide action.[8]

In any case, in this paper we are not interested in fighting over Guidance Function. Let us just suppose it is true. What we are interested in is whether we can put Guidance Function to *work* for us in any interesting ways. To anticipate: we cannot. Here is how the paper goes. In the section 1, we will explain the general form of the argument by means of which philosophers have tried to put Guidance Function to work. There, we will identify a hitherto unrecognized gap in this argument. In section 2, we will examine four arguments intended to fill this gap and argue that none of them work. The interim conclusion is thus that arguments that start from the functional role of deontic deliberation and attempt to generate interesting results are no good. In section 3, we will consider the general prospects for making arguments, of the sort we are interested in here, work. We will sketch a methodology that would do the trick. Unfortunately, as we will explain, although this methodology would bridge the gap in arguments that put claims about the function of deontic evaluation to work, it would do so in a way that vitiates any interest we might have in such arguments. In section 4, we summarize.

1. PUTTING THE FUNCTION OF DEONTIC EVALUATION TO WORK

Suppose, then, that we grant that deontic concepts only apply to actions. And suppose we grant that the best explanation of this fact is that the function of deontic evaluation is to guide action, i.e., Guidance Function. Can we put Guidance Function to work for us? That is: Can we generate interesting, substantive results from the idea that the function of deontic evaluation is to guide action? A range of philosophers think we can. For example, Smith uses this idea to argue that deontic principles must disallow conflicting verdicts on actions.[9] Wiland appeals to this idea in critiquing utilitarianism.[10] It shows up as a premise in Eric Carlson's objection to actualist accounts of moral obligation and in Karl Bykvist's discussion of the principle of normative invariance.[11] David Copp uses Guidance Function (albeit without an appeal to the contrast between deontic and other forms of evaluative judgment) in his defense of

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8 We will say more about this issue in section 3.

9 Smith, "Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts."

10 Wiland, "How Indirect Can Indirect Utilitarianism Be?"

11 Carlson, "Deliberation, Foreknowledge, and Morality as a Guide to Action"; Bykvist, "Violations of Normative Invariance."

"ought implies can."[12] The details of these arguments and their particular con-clusions will not interest us here. Instead, we will sketch the general form of the argument used to put Guidance Function to work. We will then point out a hith-erto unrecognized gap in the argument that renders it invalid as it stands. After that, we will consider the prospects for filling the gap. But first, the argument.

The general form of the argument putting the function of deontic evaluation to work is simple; it goes like this:

1. The function of deontic evaluation is to guide action (Guidance Func-tion).
2. If deontic concepts have feature X, then deontic evaluation would not be able to guide action (Disabling Condition).
3. So, it is not the case that deontic concepts have feature X (Substantive Result).

The idea is to move from a claim about the function of deontic evaluation (Guid-ance Function) to a substantive conclusion about the nature of deontic concepts (Substantive Result) by way of a particular claim about what would block deon-tic evaluation from functioning (Disabling Condition). In other words, we can generate substantive results about the nature of deontic concepts by reflecting on what would, or would not, allow deontic evaluation to function. In particular, features of deontic concepts that would rob them of their ability to guide ac-tion are ruled out as impossible features of our deontic concepts. Smith puts the point nicely, saying that while "criteria of goodness may have structural features that disable them for this job [i.e., guiding action], criteria of rightness must be free of such disabilities."[13]

Although we will not be interested in arguing over the details of particular in-stances of this argument schema, and instead will focus attention on the schema itself, it is worth seeing what an application of it looks like in a particular case. Smith's version of 2 is:

12 Copp, "'Ought' Implies 'Can,' Blameworthiness, and the Principle of Alternate Possibilities." Other philosophers have made related claims and attempted to put them to use. Our argu-ment here is focused on the claim in the case of deontic evaluation, and though we believe a parallel argument would work against these attempts to put such broader claims to use, exploring this issue is mostly beyond the scope of this paper. But see note 30 below. For cas-es of similar claims about the "point" of morality, see Hudson, "Subjectivization in Ethics"; Pritchard, "Duty and Ignorance of Fact"; Jackson, "Decision-Theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection"; Mason, "Consequentialism and the 'Ought Im-plies Can' Principle"; Wallace, "'Ought,' Reasons, and Vice"; Ross, "Foundations of Ethics," esp. ch. 7.

13 Smith, "Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts," 343.

2S. If the concepts RIGHT and WRONG ever apply to the same action, then deontic evaluation would not be able to function.

So, from (Guidance Function) and 2S, Smith concludes:

3S. It is not the case that the concepts RIGHT and WRONG ever apply to the same choosable event.

Note that 3S is a substantive, first-order normative result: it tells us that deontic principles that yield conflicting results about the same action are incorrect.[14]

It should be clear how to generate other substantive results concerning the nature of deontic concepts using this argument schema. One simply identifies some feature of deontic concepts that would plausibly block deontic evaluation from being able to function and proceeds accordingly. This, in effect, is what Carlson, Bykvist, and Wiland each does.[15]

So that is the recipe for getting from Guidance Function to substantive conclusions about the nature of deontic concepts. How successful is the argument? Here, as we have said, we are not interested in whether Guidance Function is true. As we suggested in the previous section, a range of philosophers have thought that its truth is the best explanation of why deontic concepts only apply to actions. This seems plausible and, in any case, for present purposes, we are happy to grant Guidance Function. What about Disabling Condition? Whether any particular instance of Disabling Condition is true will be a complicated matter. For example, in Smith's version of the argument, we might challenge the idea that an action's falling under the concepts WRONG and RIGHT really blocks deontic evaluation from guiding action. But, again, this certainly seems plausible. And in any case, we are happy to grant any particular instance of Disabling

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14   Smith's argument is explicitly directed at the act-utilitarian principle proposed by Tännsjö, "Moral Conflict and Moral Realism." The problem for act utilitarianism that occupies Tännsjö and Smith was first noted by Castañeda, "A Problem for Utilitarianism."

15   For present purposes, it does not matter what particular conclusions Carlson, Bykvist, and Wiland each draw from arguments of this form. But for the record: Wiland is the only author of these three who endorses the conclusion of the resulting argument. Both Carlson and Bykvist reject the respective conclusions they consider, but they do so for other reasons than those canvassed in what follows—both of them instead focus on what it takes for deontic evaluation to be capable of guiding choice. The important point here is that, as we are going to argue, the argument schema they use to reach the relevant conclusions (that they go on to reject) is invalid. So our argument is of interest in evaluating Carlson's and Bykvist's positions, since they assume the argument is valid, but it is not (or so we will argue). Hence if we are right, Carlson and Bykvist might be happy with the result, while Wiland, who endorses the conclusion of the argument, might not.

Condition for present purposes. What we want to focus on instead is the move from Guidance Function and Disabling Condition to Substantive Result.

Notice that for the move from Guidance Function and Disabling Condition to Substantive Result in *any* case to be defensible, the following must be true:

Capable: Deontic evaluation is capable of guiding action.

Capable is the gap in the argument alluded to above. It should be clear why Capable must be true in order for the move from Guidance Function and Disabling Condition to Substantive Result to be valid. After all, we can only validly infer that whatever features would prevent deontic evaluation from functioning do not obtain only if we are certain that deontic evaluation really *is* capable of functioning, i.e., guiding action. Otherwise, we might just as well conclude, in lieu of Substantive Result, that, however unfortunate it might be to discover, deontic evaluation is not capable of functioning. So, without Capable, the argument from Guidance Function to Substantive Result appears to be toothless. It might well be the case that deontic evaluation would not be able to function if this or that were the case. But we have no reason to think these things are not the case unless we also think that deontic evaluation is capable of functioning.

Despite being crucial to the success of the argument, Capable is not defended either by Smith or by any of the others who offer arguments along the same lines.[16] In fact, Capable is not even made explicit in their presentations of the argument. Hence, there is an unfilled gap in arguments that move from claims about the function of deontic evaluation to substantive claims about the nature of deontic concepts. In the next section, we will examine the prospects of four arguments intended to fill this gap. Before that, let us make two quick remarks.

First, you might, of course, have a range of worries with arguments such as 1–3. For instance, Hughes has argued that, due to failures of luminosity, there will necessarily be cases in which deontic concepts fail to guide action.[17] One way to understand Hughes's point is as an argument, based on a luminosity condition on agential guidance, against an epistemically unrestricted version of Capable. In other words, Hughes argues—and we agree—that if the idea is that deontic evaluation is capable of providing guidance *whatever the epistemic state of the agent*, then this idea is false. And hence this idea cannot be used in argu-

16   In recent work, Smith has explored what the requirement that an acceptable moral principle be capable of providing guidance amounts to; see Smith, "Using Moral Principles to Guide Decisions." Note that, as Smith herself is quick to point out, offering an account of what providing guidance would amount to is not at all the same thing as moving from a claim that the point of deontic evaluation is to provide such guidance to the claim that is capable of doing so.

17   Hughes, "Luminosity Failure, Normative Guidance and the Principle 'Ought-Implies-Can.'"

ments to substantive results such as that "ought implies can." In what follows, we will assume we are dealing with some restricted version of Capable, e.g., deontic evaluation is (subject to certain epistemic conditions on the agent) capable of guiding action. What we will argue is that we do not have any reason to accept Capable *even so restricted*.

Second, you might think that, although philosophers do sometimes talk of the point, purpose, or function of deontic evaluation and also talk of our deontic evaluations guiding our action, we should not take such talk too seriously. Such talk is meant to be taken figuratively or metaphorically. Thus, it is a bit strange to try and formalize such arguments and assess their soundness without first explaining how we should interpret this figurative language. Surely (the thought continues) someone like Smith does not think either that deontic evaluation has a purpose in the sense of, say, having been created for the sake of some end or that deontic evaluations guide us in anything like the way that a guide dog directs the actions of its blind owner. So before we can assess an argument such as Smith's argument against conflicting oughts, we need to figure out what she means by any such metaphorical language. And once we do *that*, Capable will drop out of the picture.

For instance, here is a suggestion for how we might seek to eliminate such imprecise and metaphorical language when it comes to arguing against conflicting oughts:

1. The concept of ought is such that, for any subject S and any act X available to her, if S believes that she ought to X, then she is rationally required to intend to X.[18]
2. If the concept of ought were such that it is possible both that a subject ought to ϕ and that that same subject ought to refrain from ϕ-ing, then the concept of ought would not be such that, for any subject S and any act X available to her, if S believes that she ought to X, then she is rationally required to intend to X.
3. Therefore, the concept of ought is not such that it is possible both that a subject ought to ϕ and that that same subject ought to refrain from ϕ-ing.

Note that this argument is valid. There is no suppressed premise as with the other argument. And thus there is no need to defend Capable or any other suppressed premise. Why not go this route?

We have no problem with taking this route. (Or rather, we do not have the same problems.) But that is not the route Smith and others take. What they do

18   This is roughly Broome's Enkratic Requirement (*Rationality through Reasoning*, 170).

is start with what is supposed to be an *uncontroversial* claim about the function of some area of our thought and talk, point to cases that are supposed to convince us that this function is part of what distinguishes this area of our thought and talk from other, closely related areas (such as "merely" evaluative discourse involving concepts such as GOOD and BAD), and then argue *from* this uncontroversial claim about function *to* a controversial substantive claim. Above, in the suggested revision, we have an argument that starts with a *controversial* claim regarding what agents are rationally required to intend on the basis of their beliefs about the deontic status of things and ends with a controversial claim regarding a deontic concept. In principle, this way of arguing that the deontic concept OUGHT precludes conflict strikes us as perfectly fine. (Though again, there are plenty of worries one might have.) But if this is the (sort of) argument Smith and others mean to make, why mention the function of deontic evaluation *at all*? It is *completely irrelevant* to the argument just adduced. But it is manifestly *not* irrelevant to the arguments Smith and others give: the function of deontic evaluation plays a crucial role as a premise in those arguments. Hence in evaluating the soundness of *those* arguments, it is fair to see whether we can provide some defense of the suppressed premise Capable. In the next section, we will consider four such attempts to defend Capable.

2. DEFENDING CAPABLE

2.1. The Platitude Argument

The platitude argument for Capable appeals to platitudes about deontic concepts. The argument will look slightly different depending on the deontic concept in question; here, we will focus on the platitude argument in the case of the deontic concept RIGHT. Nothing crucial hangs on focusing on RIGHT: similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other deontic concepts.

The argument starts with the idea that it is a platitude about the property *rightness* that it is capable of guiding action. Thinking of an action that it is right, the idea goes, tends to motivate an agent, *ceteris paribus*, to choose that action in her deliberation about what to do. If this is correct (and we are happy to grant that it is), then it is a correspondingly platitudinous truth about the deontic concept RIGHT that it too is capable of guiding action. This is because thinking of an action that it instantiates the property *rightness* involves thinking of the action that the deontic concept RIGHT correctly applies to it. So, the argument concludes, it is a platitude about deontic evaluation that is capable of providing guidance with respect to actions. After all, platitudinously, thinking of some

action that it is right can guide one, thinking of an action this way is a matter of applying a deontic concept (RIGHT) to it, and applying our deontic concepts just is what deontic evaluation amounts to. In other words, the evidence that deontic evaluation is capable of guiding action just is that, as matter of evident fact, it regularly does so.

For the sake of argument, we will grant the purported connection between thinking of something in terms of its deontic properties and thinking of that thing in terms of deontic concepts. The problem with this argument is that it equivocates on the notion of "guidance" between several different notions. On some notions, while it is platitudinously true that deontic concepts are capable of (this sort of) guidance, that is not the (sort of) guidance deontic concepts are required by the argument schema 1–3 to be capable of providing. Hence the argument fails. On other notions, while this might well be the (sort of) guidance deontic concepts are required by the argument schema 1–3 to be capable of providing, it is certainly not platitudinously true that deontic concepts are capable of providing that (sort of) guidance. Hence, again, the argument fails. Let us explain in detail. We can start by distinguishing two senses of "guidance."

First, take the notion of *actual guidance*. 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 in the sense that it helps determine the agent's answer to the question "What ought I to do?" and (at least in part) motivates the agent toward doing that thing. Now, in this sense, as we have already seen, it is platitudinous that deontic concepts are capable of guiding—that is, *actually guiding*—action. Typically, when agents think of some action that it is RIGHT, or OBLIGATORY, this helps settle for them what they shall do, and they are—again, typically—motivated at least in part to do that thing. Similar remarks go for WRONG and other deontic concepts. More on this in just a moment.

Second, take the notion of *correct guidance*. 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 in the sense that it helps determine the agent's answer to the question "What ought I to do?" *correctly* and (at least in part) motivates the agent toward doing that thing. Now, in this sense, as we are about to explain, it is *not at all* platitudinous that deontic concepts are capable of guiding—that is, *correctly guiding*—action.

This is because deontic concepts are capable of *correctly* guiding action only if the actions to which they are *actually* capable of guiding agents in fact possess the properties they ascribe to them. But it is manifestly not a platitude that the actions to which deontic concepts ascribe deontic properties in fact possess those properties. To see this quite clearly, notice that *deontic error theory*—or,

more generally and familiarly, *moral* error theory—is not platitudinously false. According to moral error theory, moral properties—including deontic properties—such as *rightness* and *wrongness* do not exist, and we systematically err when attempting to think and speak about them by, e.g., using deontic concepts such as RIGHT and WRONG. To be clear, we are not here arguing that moral error theory is *true*. What we are pointing out, and what is important in the present context, is that it is not a *platitude* that moral error theory is false. Since it is not a platitude that moral error theory is false, by the same token it cannot be a platitude that deontic concepts are capable of *correctly guiding*, since deontic concepts can only correctly guide on the condition that moral error theory is false.

So, it is a platitude that deontic concepts can *actually* guide agents' actions, and it is not a platitude that deontic concepts can *correctly* guide agents' actions. Obviously, we want to avoid equivocation in our argument; hence if the platitude argument in favor of Capable is to be successful, it must be that the sense of "guidance" in the entire argument schema 1–3 is *actual*—and not *correct*—guidance. Unfortunately, that cannot be right. The sense of "guidance" intended in the argument schema 1–3 must be *correct* guidance. Actual guidance is too weak a notion to do the work assigned to the idea of guidance in arguments such as 1–3. Very briefly—more on this below—this is because interpreting "guidance" as "actual guidance" robs arguments such as 1–3 of any substantive interest. It is therefore neither here nor there to point out that deontic concepts are (platitudinously) capable of *actual* guidance; what is required is a defense of the claim that they are capable of *correct* guidance. And as we just saw, it is *not* a platitude that deontic concepts are capable of correct guidance.

To see why interpreting "guidance" in Capable as "actual guidance" robs arguments such as 1–3 of any substantive interest, consider what happens to the schema in which Capable figures, and which Smith and others deploy in order to drive out substantive results regarding the nature of deontic concepts, when we interpret "guidance" as "actual guidance":

1. The function of deontic evaluation is to guide action (Guidance Function).
2. If deontic concepts have feature X, then deontic evaluation would not be able to guide action (Disabling Condition).
3. So, it is not the case that deontic concepts have feature X (Substantive Result).

Our argument in this paper is that Capable is a suppressed premise without which this argument schema is invalid. In our view, the argument including Capable is valid but, as we are now busy showing, we have no independent reason

to accept Capable. The present suggestion, on behalf of the platitude argument, is that we interpret "guidance" in 1 and Capable as "actual guidance." Our view is that, understood in this way, we might have reason to accept Capable, and so to accept the arguments in which it figures, but doing so would either make the corresponding instances of Disabling Condition *far* less plausible, or would make any true instances of Disabling Condition far less interesting. We will explain.

First, notice that particular instances of Disabling Condition are far less plausible when "guidance" is read as "actual guidance" rather than "correct guidance." Recall Smith's version of Disabling Condition:

> 2s. If the concepts RIGHT and WRONG ever apply to the same action, then deontic evaluation would not be able to guide action.

While 2s has some plausibility if the point of deontic evaluation is to *correctly* guide action, it lacks any such plausibility if the point of deontic evaluation is simply to *actually* guide action. For suppose the point of deontic evaluation is simply to actually guide agents with respect to what actions to perform. And suppose deontic evaluation is capable of doing so. 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. To explain: the fact that the concepts WRONG and RIGHT might sometimes apply to the same action does not show that deontic evaluation is incapable of guiding 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 two concepts apply to the same action unless, as a matter of fact, she thinks both concepts apply. And while it might well be true that on thinking correctly that both concepts apply to the same action an agent is incapable of being *correctly* guided by her deontic evaluation (after all, that evaluation cannot correctly settle for her what to do), it is not true that on thinking correctly that both concepts apply to the same event an agent is incapable of being *actually* guided by her deontic evaluation.[19] At worst what will happen is that the agent will find herself being actually guided toward 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. What-

19 This fact, that an agent cannot be *correctly* guided when both concepts apply is, in effect, what Smith argues for in support of 2s. Thus we think it is correct and not merely actual guidance she means to appeal to. See Smith, "Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts," esp. 342–43.

ever she does, as a matter of fact *she will have been actually guided*.[20] In short, the point is that deontic evaluation's being capable of actual guidance does not at all preclude, in the way that its being capable of correct guidance intuitively does preclude, the sort of deontic conflict identified in premises like 2s.

The second, related, problem is that it is not clear that there is *any* interesting instance of 2 that is true when "guidance" is interpreted as "actual guidance." This is because a kind of evaluation's being capable of actually providing guidance with respect to choosable events is an astonishingly weak requirement, one that does not plausibly put any interesting restrictions on the nature of the concepts involved in that kind of evaluation. To see this, notice that in order for a kind of evaluation to be capable of actually providing guidance with respect to actions, all that is required is that the concepts employed in that kind of evaluation must be capable of being thought by agents who deploy those concepts to bear on whether or not to perform certain actions. Non-deontic evaluative concepts such as GOOD and BAD meet this requirement with ease. So too do astrological concepts, such as TAUREAN. Of course, such concepts might have "structural features" that disable them from *correctly* guiding action.[21] But in the present context this is irrelevant. So long as the concepts are capable of being taken by the agent to bear on the choice between actions, this is enough for those concepts to be actually capable of guiding such choices. We cannot learn anything interesting about the features, structural or otherwise, that these concepts have simply by reflecting on the fact that they are in the business of *actually* guiding action.

To drive home the point, compare a platitude argument for the astrological version of Capable:

Astrology-Capable: Astrological evaluation is capable of guiding action.

It is a platitude about the property *being born between April 21 and May 21* that it is capable of guiding action. For example, thinking of oneself that one is born on April 30, if one believes in astrology, tends to motivate one to choose certain actions in one's deliberation about what to do. If this is correct (and we are happy to grant that it is), then it is a correspondingly platitudinous truth about the astrological concept TAUREAN that it too is capable of guiding action. This is because thinking of oneself that one instantiates the property *being born between April 21 and May 21* just is thinking of oneself that the astrological concept TAURE-AN applies to one. So, the argument concludes, it is a platitude about astrological evaluation that it is capable of guiding action. After all, platitudinously, thinking

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20 It does not help to assume that the agent can do nothing, for doing nothing will in a situation like this have a deontic status.

21 See Smith, "Moral Realism, Moral Conflict, and Compound Acts."

of oneself that one is born between April 21 and May 21 can guide action, thinking of oneself in this way is a matter of applying an astrological concept (TAU-REAN) to oneself, and applying astrological concepts just is what astrological evaluation amounts to. In other words, the evidence that astrological evaluation is capable of guiding action just is that, as a matter of evident fact, unfortunately, it regularly does so.

Of course, since (we hope) we are all error theorists about astrology, this not only does not amount to an argument for the claim that astrological concepts are capable of *correct* guidance, we in fact know that astrological concepts are *not* capable of this sort of guidance. In any case, we cannot infer from the fact that a kind of evaluation (and the concepts it involves) provides guidance of the first sort—the sort involved in *actually* guiding our actions—to the fact that it provides guidance of the second sort—the sort involved in *correctly* guiding our actions. And Capable, in the sense needed for arguments of the form above, from Guidance Function to Substantive Result via Disabling Condition, to be valid and to deliver interesting results is a claim about the ability of deontic evaluation to provide guidance of the second sort: it is the claim that deontic evaluation can correctly guide our actions.[22]

The upshot is this: interpreting "guidance" as "actual guidance" robs arguments from Guidance Function to Substantive Result of any interest. For there do not appear to be any interesting features that concepts must have above and beyond being able to be taken by agents to bear on the choiceworthiness of an action—an incredibly low bar to clear, as we have seen—in order to be capable of actually, as opposed to correctly, guiding action. And so, since there will be no true interesting instances of Disabling Condition, when "guidance" is read as "actual guidance," arguments from Guidance Function via such Disabling Conditions to Substantive Results will either be unsound or uninteresting. Since proponents of these arguments certainly do not mean for such arguments to be unsound or uninteresting in this way, we think it is most charitable to interpret them as understanding "guidance" as "correct guidance." But, as we have already discussed, if we understand "guidance" as "correct guidance," then the platitude argument in favor of Capable does not go through. For, again, it is not a platitude that deontic evaluation can provide correct guidance; this is so even while we should admit that, like astrological evaluation, it is capable of providing actual guidance. We conclude, therefore, that the platitude argument for Capable fails.[23]

22 As we understand things, proponents of astrology also mean for Astrology-Capable to be taken in this second sense, the difference being that this is easily demonstrably false in the case of astrology.

23 Thanks to an anonymous referee for comments on this section.

2.2. The Platitude Argument for Real(ists)

We just argued that the only interesting version of Capable in the present context, where the relevant notion of guidance is understood as *correct* guidance, is not platitudinously true. In effect, our argument was that there are clearly those—for instance, error theorists and (some) anti-realists—who do not accept this claim. Since it is not a platitude that (say) error theory is false, and since the truth of Capable would entail that error theory is false, Capable cannot be platitudinously true. But you might worry that this argument, even assuming it works, misses the mark.[24] This is because the target of this paper is those who are inclined to make arguments such as 1–3. But (the thought goes) anyone inclined to make an argument such as 1–3 already thinks that there *really are* deontic properties (in contrast to the error theorist). Thus our argument that it is not platitudinous that deontic evaluation is actually capable of correctly guiding action that relies on the fact that it is not platitudinous that such properties *exist* is illicit. This is because, in the context of arguments over the function, purpose, or point of deontic evaluation, proponents of arguments such as 1–3—the very arguments that rely on Capable—are within their rights to assume that deontic properties exist. And if they are within their rights to assume that these properties exist, then pointing out that it is not platitudinous that they can correctly guide by way of pointing out that it is not platitudinous that they exist will be a bit of a non sequitur.

So, the worry is that our argument now fails to find a target. In particular, metaethical *realists* are supposed to be the sorts of creatures who go about using arguments such as 1–3. And they use arguments such as 1–3 in the context of arguing with *other realists* over the nature and shape of deontic properties (and concepts). And in that context, it is perfectly platitudinous to say that

> *Correct Capable*: Deontic evaluation is actually capable of correctly guiding action.

That is true even if, when arguing with (say) anti-realists, it is *not* platitudinous to say such a thing.

What to do? First, it is important to recall the context in which Correct Capable is being put to use. It is the elided premise in arguments that have the form:

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

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24 Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point and for encouraging us to be clear about how the platitude argument works in the case of realists.

2. If deontic concepts have feature *X*, then deontic evaluation would not be able to guide action (Disabling Condition).
3. So, it is not the case that deontic concepts have feature *X* (Substantive Result).

As discussed earlier in the paper (section 1), arguments such as 1–3 are invalid without Correct Capable. Without Correct Capable, we are not licensed to infer anything about the nature of deontic properties or concepts from noticing that this-or-that feature (say, yielding conflicting verdicts) would disable them from actually correctly guiding action. We might just as well conclude, unhappily perhaps, that Correct Capable is false: that deontic concepts cannot actually correctly guide action. What we are now in the business of litigating is whether Correct Capable is platitudinously true (and so not apt for falsification in this way). The present suggestion is that for everyone interested in using arguments such as 1–3, Correct Capable *is* platitudinously true. So, the relevant question becomes: for whom is Correct Capable platitudinously true? Let us divide parties to the dispute into realists and anti-realists. As we showed in section 2.1, it is obvious that for (at least most) anti-realists, Correct Capable is not platitudinously true (since, after all, it is not even true).

Is Correct Capable platitudinously true among realists? Notice, this question is *not* the same as the question, "Do realists take Correct Capable for granted in presenting arguments such as 1–3?" The answer to *that* question is yes. But that is neither here nor there in the present context. This point is crucial: of course, we are perfectly willing to admit that plenty of realists take Correct Capable for granted in presenting arguments such as 1–3; in effect, the point of this paper is to argue that they do so only *illicitly*. Since (as we are now busy arguing) we have not been given a reason to think that Correct Capable is (platitudinously) true, realists are not actually licensed to take Correct Capable for granted in whatever their particular versions of the argument schema 1–3 are.

One quick qualification: in section 3, we suggest that there is *one* group of realists who *are* licensed to take something like Correct Capable for granted in presenting "arguments" (really, pseudo-arguments) such as 1–3. These are those realists who embrace the pragmatist, or functionalist, methodology according to which the nature of deontic concepts can be simply read of the function of those concepts. On that view, as we explain in detail later, there is no gap between discovering of a concept that its function is thus-and-so and the question of whether the concept can fulfill its function. Very briefly, this is because on the functionalist or pragmatist view the concepts are simply *defined* as those that are capable of playing the relevant role, of fulfilling the relevant function. But as we

explain, these pragmatist realists are not those who offer arguments such as 1–3. And that is not surprising. This is because such arguments lose any substantive interest if one is a pragmatist: they are really just roundabout restatements of one's particular functionalist commitments. We refer the reader to that discussion (section 3) for details.

So the question is whether realists who do *not* embrace the functionalist or pragmatist methodology are licensed in treating Correct Capable as a platitude. They are not; and they are not licensed in doing so even when arguing with other realists over the nature and shape of deontic properties.

It is no surprise that realists interested in offering arguments of the form 1–3 are not licensed in virtue of their realism in treating Correct Capable as a platitude, but rather must treat it as something to be established—even when arguing with other realists over the nature and shape of deontic properties. This is because, as with any set of concepts or properties, being a kind of generic realist about those concepts is, in the first place at least, a relatively low bar, a relatively thin requirement. In effect, all it takes to be a generic realist about concept X in the relevant sense is to accept the thought that concept X picks out some real property or properties of X-ness. And being a realist about the relevant properties is, in turn, itself a relatively thin requirement: it just requires thinking that whether and to what extent objects possess the real property (e.g., X-ness) is independent of (roughly) people's thinkings, sayings, or doings.

But notice that thinking *that*, that some property exists independently (roughly) of people's mental lives, is not yet to think anything at all about whether and to what extent that property is *accessible*, let alone *useful*, in the sense of playing a particular role in their mental lives, e.g., via the correct application of the concept that picks it out. But it is this latter claim that would have to be true in order for Correct Capable to be a platitude, *even among realists*. For you might well think that *rightness* is a real property of actions without also thinking that the property of *rightness* is capable of correctly guiding agents' actions (say, via the correct application of the concept RIGHT). This shows that being a realist about the deontic just is not sufficient to license treating Correct Capable as a platitude. And, once again, it is *certainly* not licit to treat Correct Capable as a platitude by pointing out that, after all, if Correct Capable were false, then deontic evaluation would not be able to achieve whatever (let us agree) its function is. That, in effect, is precisely our point: since we have been given no reason to think Correct Capable is (here, platitudinously) true, on discovering that this-or-that feature of deontic concepts (or properties) would preclude them from fulfilling their function, we might as well conclude that, unhappily, unfortunately, regrettably, deontic evaluation cannot do what it is for.

Let us put the point another way. Realists about deontic concepts are (we can safely suppose) realists about deontic properties. This means (again, roughly) that such realists think that deontic properties exist independently of what anyone thinks of the matter. Such realists might then go on to argue with each other over the nature and shape of those properties. According to some, the deontic properties are shaped by the evaluative properties, whereas according to others, things are reversed; in other words, there is some debate among realists over whether (in the familiar slogan) the good is prior to the right, or vice versa. So, are such realists, in conversation with one another, licensed to assume that, whatever the shape of the deontic concepts, and so the deontic properties they pick out, the application of those concepts is capable of correctly guiding agents' actions? Of course they are not. It is one thing for realists to agree with one another that the subject matter the nature of which they disagree about is *real*, in the sense that its existence does not depend on what anyone thinks of the matter. It is another thing altogether for realists to agree with one another that the subject the nature of which they disagree about is *capable* of playing a very specific role, viz., the role of correctly (*not just actually*) guiding agents' actions. We do not see any reason to think realists should (or indeed do) agree on this latter matter as a platitudinous truth.

Here is an example. It seems reasonable to suppose that (say) Mill is a realist in the relevant sense; that is, he thinks that deontic properties, such as *rightness*, exist and are instantiated regardless of what anyone thinks of the matter. Nevertheless, Mill is not—and famously does not take himself to be—licensed in assuming that deontic properties, such as *rightness*, are capable of correctly (i.e., accurately) guiding agents' actions. Instead, as we see in *Utilitarianism*, Mill is at pains to argue that, *even if* deontic properties as he conceives of them *are not* capable of correctly guiding action—because, say, those properties do not resonate with agents, or because they are too difficult to accurately capture because too complex—*still*, his overall moral theory *is* capable of correctly guiding agential behavior (via the application of rules, say).[25] There are complications here: some take this to be evidence that, in fact, Mill is a sort of *indirect* consequentialist, and that rightness is not after all a matter of maximizing overall (expected) happiness but instead is a matter of according behavior to rules the adoption of which has that result. But again, in the present context we can ignore that complication. That is because the point is that even *if* one is a realist (as it seems fair to assume Mill is) about deontic properties, that does not immediately, platitudinously, license one in assuming that the deontic properties

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25 See especially the discussion of the two "demandingness" objections Mill considers in *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2.

are thereby capable of guiding agential behavior (via the correct application of deontic concepts, say).

Hence realism about a thing or things together with a claim about the function of that thing is just far too weak a set of commitments to obviously, *platitudinously* entail that that thing is capable of doing what it is (admittedly) for doing. The platitude argument for realists in favor of Capable fails.

2.3. *The Characteristic Function Argument*

What we will call the characteristic function argument in favor of Capable has been suggested to us as a response to the failure of the platitude argument. Despite the fact that, as we will see, it suffers the same problem as the platitude argument, we include it here since it has been, surprisingly in our view, a common reaction. Here is how it goes. Above we said that Smith and others endorsed a version of an argument according to which

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

According to the present idea, attributing such an argument to Smith and others is a mistake. Instead, these authors should be understood as endorsing an argument according to which

1. The *characteristic* or *normal* function of deontic evaluation is to guide action (Characteristic Guidance Function).

The idea, then, would be that, as one reader put it, "just about everyone in moral philosophy" accepts that deontic concepts do characteristically or normally guide choice. So, presumably, just about everyone should also accept that deontic concepts are capable of doing so: after all, they characteristically or normally do so.

Unfortunately, this argument suffers exactly the same equivocation as the platitude argument: we are happy to agree that, when "guidance" is read as "actual guidance," deontic concepts do achieve their characteristic function of providing guidance. That is something that "just about everyone in moral philosophy" should accept. As we have already noted, agents regularly use deontic concepts in the course of deciding what to do. But, again, this does not mean that those concepts characteristically or normally provide *correct* guidance. When "guidance" is read as "correct guidance," we see no reason to suppose, as this revised version of the argument would do, that deontic evaluation is capable of guiding action, whether that function is *characteristic*, *normal*, or otherwise. (If you are not convinced, consider the astrological version of the argument from 1–3.)

In other words, altering our understanding of the *point* of deontic evaluation to one where it is (merely) a *characteristic* or (statistically?) *normal* point does nothing to show, without further argument, that deontic evaluation is actually capable of achieving it.

2.4. The Existence Argument

The existence argument for Capable goes as follows. If deontic evaluation was not capable of doing what it is for, there would not be a practice of deontic evaluation. We would not have and use the concepts RIGHT, WRONG, and OBLIGATORY if the sort of evaluations that these concepts allow us to make were incapable of providing (correct) guidance. And if we did have and use them (as we do), our having and using these concepts would be a mystery, if deontic evaluation was not capable of doing what it is for: Why would we engage in such an odd practice, if we did not thereby manage to do what this practice is for? Denying Capable therefore saddles us with an explanatory burden that cannot be met; so we have sufficient reason to accept that deontic evaluation is capable of doing what deontic evaluation is for. And given that its function is to (correctly) guide action, we can infer that deontic evaluation is capable of (correctly) guiding action.

The existence argument fails. The mere fact that we evaluate actions using deontic concepts is perfectly compatible with deontic evaluation being incapable of correctly guiding action. Consider, again, the analogy with astrology: many people rely on astrology in forming attitudes toward the future, yet astrology is not a correct guide to future events. People rely on astrology in forming attitudes toward the future because they believe astrology is capable of doing what it is for; the fact that many people have this belief is sufficient to explain why people make use of astrological evaluation. Perhaps we are in a parallel situation when it comes to deontic evaluation. Many people believe that deontic evaluation can guide action. But if, for instance, some form of error theory is true, then these people are all radically mistaken.[26] All that is needed for a successful explanation of why there is a practice of deontic evaluation is a sufficiently widespread belief that deontic evaluation is capable of doing what it is for, viz., correctly guiding action; whether or not it does so *in fact* is neither here nor there.

Here is another way to put the same point: everyone owes us an explanation of why we engage in the practice of deontic evaluation. One explanation of this fact is that deontic evaluation is for guiding action, and it is capable of correctly doing so. But if our focus is just on an explanation of why we engage in the practice of deontic evaluation, the following explanation looks equally

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26 This is presumably the view of Mackie, "Ethics." More recently, it has been defended by Streumer, *Unbelievable Errors*.

good: deontic evaluation is for guiding action, and people *believe* it is capable of correctly doing so. Accepting that deontic evaluation fails to do what it is for therefore does not saddle one with an explanatory burden that cannot be met, and thus the mere fact that the practice of deontic evaluation exists does not provide support for Capable.[27]

The fan of the existence argument might reply: while we perhaps can explain why there is such a thing as deontic evaluation if we grant that it cannot do what it is for, when we reject Capable we find ourselves having to accept the unappealing implication that the practice of deontic evaluation can be abandoned without cost. But this would be too quick. For even if we cannot always rely on our judgments using deontic concepts in making practical decisions (that is part of what rejecting Capable entails), that hardly shows that we have no use for such concepts. After all, these concepts allow us to think and talk about deontic properties. Even if the primary context in which we are interested in using these concepts is practical deliberation, we also think and talk using deontic concepts in other contexts. For one, we are sometimes interested in the moral evaluation of past actions (both our own and those of others). For another, by referring to deontic properties by deontic concepts, we might express our view that these properties are the properties of actions that we consider to be most important. The ability to perform this expressive maneuver may in itself be reason enough to maintain the practice of deontic evaluation even in the face of its incapacity to provide correct guidance. Even if deontic evaluation fails to be capable of providing guidance, we would therefore still have a use for such concepts. So the existence argument fails.

2.5. *The Presupposition Argument*

The presupposition argument is related to the existence argument. According to the presupposition argument, it is a presupposition of engaging in deontic evaluation that such evaluation is capable of guiding choice and action. In other words, in order to engage in deontic evaluation, one must assume that Capable is true. Recall, that idea was suggested in the preceding discussion as an explanation of the existence of the practice of deontic evaluation. And, the argument continues, while we might not be able to show that Capable is true, this merely represents a *logical* gap: it is a gap anyone who is engaged in deontic evaluation must assume is closed. Those engaged in deontic evaluation therefore need not

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27 To be clear, the argument we are offering does not itself support moral, in particular deontic, skepticism or error theory, understood as the view that there are no deontic properties of things, or that deontic concepts have no proper extension. For all we have said, there might well be deontic properties of things, and so deontic concepts that have proper extensions.

argue for the truth of Capable because anyone who is engaged in deontic evaluation will also assume the truth of Capable. And so we need only care about Capable when speaking to deontic skeptics. But perhaps, as some have argued, we need not worry about deontic skeptics: if that is right, it might appear that we need not worry about defending Capable.

The problem with this argument is that, as we have already seen, the interest in Capable is not in its use or presupposition by people actually engaged in deontic evaluation. If that were where Capable earned its living, then the presupposition argument would be sufficient to rescue it. But that is not where Capable is put to work. Instead, Capable is put to work—or rather, is assumed to be capable of working—in metanormative arguments (by Smith and others) over the nature of deontic properties and concepts. The context in which Capable appears as an elided premise is therefore not a context in which we must assume Capable is true in order to "go on," for the context is not one of actually engaging in deontic evaluation—of ascribing deontic properties to things by way of our deontic concepts. Instead, the context in which Capable is at issue is one in which we are arguing over the metanormative features of deontic properties and concepts—whether, for instance, *wrongness* and *rightness* are compossible.

The presupposition argument therefore fails: while it might be true (as above) that people engaged in the practice of deontic evaluation have license to or even must assume that Capable is true, it is neither true that those engaged in the practice of thinking about the nature of deontic properties and concepts—such as Smith—have license to do so nor true that they must. And so it does not follow that Capable is not in need of defense by such people.

3. PRAGMATISM AND DULLING THE ARGUMENT

Things look pretty grim. What to do? Here is a thought: maybe the trouble began, unnoticed, at the outset; what happened was that we misunderstood what kind of claim Guidance Function was meant to be. We have been treating Guidance Function as a claim about the function of deontic evaluation where that function is the kind of thing we discover on the basis of an investigation that is independent of our investigation into the nature of deontic evaluation per se. On this way of understanding things, importantly, we are negotiating two independent things—the *function* of deontic evaluation and what deontic evaluation *is*—and it is the fact that these two things are independent that generates the trouble with Capable.

An analogy will help. Suppose we are anthropologists studying a tribe and we learn through an informant that each household possesses an instance of the

same artifact. Now, there are two questions we might have about this artifact, which can in principle be answered separately, via two separate investigations. One is the question of what this artifact *is*. To answer this question, we examine an instance of it: it is a wooden U-shaped artifact with an arm's-length piece of wood attached to the bottom of the U. (Picture a giant wooden tuning fork.) To confirm our answer, we obtain and examine more instances: all ten we have examined also resemble giant wooden tuning forks. The second question—likely the more interesting question—is what this artifact is *for*. Now, although it might turn out that our answer to the first question helps us answer the second—perhaps it turns out to be *for* tuning giant wooden instruments—there is no guarantee of that. One way our investigation into the question of what the artifact is for might go is by way of observing how the tribe uses the artifact, what function it serves for them. And, importantly, because these are strictly separate questions, there is no guarantee that, given the kind of thing the artifact *is* (something that resembles a giant wooden tuning fork) it is *capable* of doing what it is *for* (perhaps the tribe tries to use it as a divining rod, or a spoon).

Back to deontic evaluation and *its* point. We have been treating deontic evaluation like the giant wooden tuning fork, as subject to two questions that are in principle separable: (i) What is it? (answer: it is the deployment of *these* concepts, e.g., RIGHT, WRONG, OBLIGATORY) and (ii) What is it *for*? (answer: it is for guiding action). Hence we face our troublesome gap: there's no guarantee that, given the kind of thing deontic evaluation *is*, it is capable of doing what it is *for*.

But there is a different way to approach things, where the answers to our two questions—what something is and what it is for—get negotiated together, rather than separately. The view sometimes gets called "pragmatism," other times "functionalism." Here is Simon Blackburn—he calls it pragmatism—on the approach:

> You will be a pragmatist about an area of discourse if you pose a … question: how does it come about that we go in for this kind of discourse and thought? What is the explanation of this bit of our language game? And then you offer an account of what we are up to in going in for this discourse, and the account eschews any use of the referring expressions of the discourse … or any semantic or ontological attempt to "interpret" the discourse in a domain, to find referents for its terms, or truth-makers for its sentences.… Instead, the explanation proceeds by talking in different terms of what is done by so talking. It offers a revelatory genealogy or anthropology or even a just-so story about how this mode of talking and

thinking and practising might come about, given in terms of the functions it serves.[28]

On this way of approaching matters, our gap—Capable—does not open up. This is because on learning what this bit of our language game—the deontic bit, the bit involving deploying the concepts RIGHT, WRONG, and so on—does, we thereby learn what these parts of our conceptual scheme—the deontic concepts—are like. We are not interested, then, in whether the deontic realm turns out, on ontological investigation, to support the idea that deontic evaluation is capable of (successfully) guiding action; instead, we are interested in discovering what the deontic concepts do for us, and we simply identify the deontic concepts as *whichever concepts in fact do that*. Since we agree—at least, we have said that we are happy to agree for the purposes of this paper—that what marks off the deontic from the (merely) evaluative is its distinctive functional role in (properly) guiding action, we get for free the idea that deontic concepts can do this; the deontic concepts are defined as the concepts that are capable of playing this role for us, and so there not only is not, there also cannot be any logical gap—such as Capable—between their point and their ability to achieve this point. As we said, this view—better: methodological approach—goes by different names. We will follow Blackburn in calling it pragmatism.[29]

So, if we are pragmatists, the trouble with Capable, and so with the attending arguments from a claim about the point of a domain of evaluation to substantive results about the nature of concepts in that domain, seems to disappear. Perhaps, then, the charitable way to interpret Smith is as being committed to this methodology, and so correspondingly interpret their arguments as not relying on a defense of Capable that, as we have argued above, is not available. But as we will now explain, interpreting the arguments' proponents in this way completely vitiates any interest we might have in those arguments. Hence we are left with a dilemma: either we interpret proponents of these arguments as pragmatists (of the relevant sort), in which case the arguments lose all interest, or we do not, in which case their arguments are invalid without Capable, and therefore unconvincing without a defense of Capable, which as we have argued is not likely to be forthcoming.

Recall the argument schema we are interested in here:

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28 Blackburn, "Pragmatism," 78.

29 This brand of pragmatism should not be confused with the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey (let alone that of Charles Peirce). In some ways, the "functionalism" label is preferable, but that too is already taken.

1. The function of deontic evaluation is to guide action (Guidance Function).
2. If deontic concepts have feature X, then deontic evaluation would not be able to guide action (Disabling Condition).
3. So, it is not the case that deontic concepts have feature X (Substantive Result).

This schema represents an attempt to move *from* a claim about the function of deontic evaluation *to* a substantive result regarding the nature of deontic concepts. But if we are pragmatists about deontic evaluation, although instances of this argument schema do not require a defense of Capable, they are also completely otiose: rather than representing independent arguments for novel, surprising conclusions about the nature of deontic concepts, they are simply long-winded ways of reiterating one's view about the functional role of deontic evaluation. For deontic concepts will just be *whatever concepts are capable of playing the role deontic evaluation assigns to them*. If *what it is* to be a deontic concept is to be something that plays the role of (properly) guiding action in deontic evaluation, then *of course* a feature of that concept that would disable the concept from playing that role can be ruled out as a feature of that concept. Hence interpreting proponents of instances of this argument schema—such as Smith—as committed to the pragmatist approach appears to vitiate any interest in the arguments they adduce. So that cannot be right.

Let us be clear. It is not that we think this methodology is mistaken, or somehow always gets off on the wrong foot. Quite the contrary: we ourselves are attracted to it for a range of reasons, not least of which is its ability to *shut down* disputes over whether, e.g., deontic evaluation is capable of doing what it is for. But pragmatism's ability to shut down such disputes comes at a cost: it blocks instances of the schema 1–3 from being *interesting*, i.e., it blocks them from providing us with any substantive results. That is not a cost that proponents of particular versions of arguments that take this form will likely be willing to pay, given their interest in using such arguments to actually deliver substantive results. And in any case, it does not appear to be how proponents of such arguments think of what they are up to: they think of themselves as moving *from* a story about the point of a domain of evaluation *to* some view about the nature of the concepts involved in that domain, where in principle at least the nature of those concepts is specifiable independently from the story about what use we put them to. (They are like our anthropologist, negotiating two questions independently.) Hence proponents of these arguments appear to face a dilemma: either embrace the pragmatist approach, in which case they must give up the

ambitious, substantive-result-delivering version of the arguments, or provide a defense of Capable. And as we argued above, no defense of Capable appears forthcoming. We would be happy to hear of their embrace of pragmatism, but it seems to us that it makes mysterious—certainly, as we have said, otiose—the adducement of the argument from the *point*, e.g., of deontic evaluation to the *nature*, e.g., of deontic concepts.[30]

4. SUMMARY

Arguments from the point, purpose, or function of deontic evaluation to substantive results about the nature of deontic concepts are exciting: they promise to provide us with insight into the nature of the deontic by way of reflection on the use to which we put deontic concepts. Unfortunately, in order for such arguments to work, their proponents must defend the claim that deontic evaluation is not only *for* guiding action, it is *capable* of doing so. This leaves proponents of such arguments in a bind. On the one hand, no defense of this claim appears to work—we argued here that four *prima facie* plausible ones do not, and no others are forthcoming. On the other hand, although it is possible to remove the need to defend the claim that deontic evaluation is capable of doing what it is for by retreating to what we have called the pragmatist methodology, in that case such arguments will not be interesting. Neither option is appealing.

Where to go from here? As we said, we are sympathetic to the pragmatist methodology. So, rather than attempting to provide a novel defense of Capable, that is where we are inclined to move. But adopting that methodology 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 any 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. Now, those ambitions—which tend to take on a metaphysical character—do not seem all that lofty to us, and we are not bothered

30 It is worth pointing out that some philosophers have taken this approach to understanding concepts in a different evaluative domain, namely normative epistemology. The idea there, very briefly, is that we can gain insights about the nature of central epistemic concepts, e.g., knowledge, by investigating the role those concepts play in our (cognitive, epistemic) lives. For instance, Greco says that "We can ask what our concept of knowledge and our knowledge language are for. We can ask what roles they play in our conceptual economy.... By doing so, we suggest, we gain further insight into how our concepts ... can be expected to behave" (*Achieving Knowledge*, 139). For the classic source of this idea, see Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. For more recent expressions of it, see the essays collected in Henderson and Greco, *Epistemic Evaluation*.

by giving them up. But whether doing so will be appealing to others will likely come down to temperament.[31]

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31 Both authors contributed equally to the main ideas in this paper. Sections 3 and 2.2 are down to Sharadin, and complaints about the claims therein should be directed to him.

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