NATURALISM WITHOUT TEARS

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Abstract
Parfit argues that naturalistic theories that seek to understand normative concepts either as simply descriptive of certain natural facts about our desires or as expressive of our desires commit us to a bleak normative nihilism whereby nothing matters. I here defend such naturalism, in particular its expressivist variety, against this charge. It is true that such views commit us to there being no reasons as Parfit understands them. But for Parfit to suppose that equivalent to there being no reasons leaves him begging the question where the relative credibility of these rival understandings is just what is at issue.¹

1. If you have children it is a good idea to see to it that they learn to read and write. If you are going on holiday to the North Pole it is a good idea to pack plenty of warm clothing. If your friends buy you nice presents on your birthday it is a good idea to thank them. There are many things in life that are mysterious and hard to understand but truths such as these do not really appear to be among them. Nothing, it is natural to think, could be easier to understand or more straightforward. And yet these are truths about reasons, normative truths, truths which we philosophers seem to find distinctly vexatious and puzzling.

One very natural thought about how to understand these truths is by placing them in the context of the fact that we are creatures who care about stuff. We care about, inter alia, the flourishing of our children, about not dying prematurely from hypothermia,

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about having friends whom we treat well and remain on good terms with. That much is unmysterious enough and in the light of this, it might seem pretty unmysterious why all the stuff I just said is a good idea is a good idea.

This very natural thought can readily lead us to understand reasons in the sort of way recently articulated by Harry Frankfurt in his characteristically rich Tanner Lectures in the following terms:

In my view it is only in virtue of what we actually care about that anything is important to us. The world is everywhere infused for us with importance; many things are important to us. That is because there are many things we care about just for themselves, and many that stand in pertinent instrumental relationships to those things. If there were nothing that we cared about – if our response to the world were utterly and uniformly flat – there would be no reason for us to care about anything.²

This is an elegant and dramatic statement of what, for Parfit as I understand him, is exactly how not to think about normativity. For Parfit, reasons are nothing to do with what we care about or what we want or desire, our sentiments, our emotions, the passions of our soul. Reason rather sets up an independent standard all this stuff is supposed to meet. To say that my reason to avoid exposing myself to massive risk of freezing to death is somehow a matter of my strongly desiring not to suffer such a fate, gets things, for Parfit, exactly backwards. Rather I should both avoid and desire to avoid freezing to death because I have, independently of my desire, reason to avoid such a fate. Reason-talk is not to be explained or unpacked in terms of any other sort of talk. Its subject matter is a domain of irreducible normative truths, truths that humans differ from all other species in having the capacity to understand and respond to. Rival naturalistic views of normativity, whether reductionist or expressivist, are, he alleges bleak, committed to the despairing claim that nothing matters.

The fundamental problem with this view is that, if we try to hold it, the truths I just described as unmysterious can start to look very mysterious indeed. I don’t need to tell you why this is. For Parfit

rather eloquently tells us himself in his recent paper ‘Normativity’. He writes there as follows:

Many . . . writers ignore the possibility that there might be normative truths. . . . Gibbard regards this possibility as too fantastic to be worth considering. [7] There are good reasons to have this attitude. Irreducible normative truths, if there are any, are most unusual. As many writers claim, it is not obvious how such truths fit into a scientific world-view. They are not empirically testable, or explicable by natural laws. Nor does there seem to be anything for such truths to be about. What can the property of badness be? [7] Given these points, it is natural to doubt whether these alleged truths even make sense. If such truths are not empirical, or about features of the natural world, how do we ever come to understand them? If words like ‘reason’ and ‘ought’ neither refer to natural features, nor express our attitudes, what can they possibly mean?3

And he concedes that ‘[n]on-reductive realists do not give helpful answers to these questions’. I fear I agree. It’s profoundly mysterious what these irreducible normative truths are meant to be, profoundly mysterious how we are supposed to know about them and profoundly mysterious why we should care about them. Given all that the difficulties facing rival accounts of normativity had better be pretty desperate. Parfit thinks they are. In particular he argues in On What Matters that this is true for what he calls desire-based theories. Such theories, he thinks are bleak, committed to the despairing claim that nothing matters. In what follows I will try to explain a little of how I understand the relationship between desires and reasons and why I don’t think it bleak at all.

2. We are animals who care about stuff. In this we are not unique. Other animals very plausibly also care about all kinds of things. But we are the only creatures that care in ways that are mediated by language and concepts that express in complex and structured ways the passions in our souls and their engagement with the world.

3 This and the following quotation are from Derek Parfit, ‘Normativity’, Oxford Studies in Metaethics, 1 (2006), p. 330.
Caring is more than desiring even in the broadest natural sense of ‘desire’. Hamish, let us say, has a desire that Scotland win the 2010 World Cup. Then, in 2010 Scotland does just that. (Sometimes, as Parfit stresses, philosophers properly trade in far-fetched examples.) After this time it is no longer natural to attribute to Hamish a desire for a Scottish victory. It’s a basic feature of the logical grammar of desire that we don’t speak of desiring believed fait accomplis. But Hamish does not lose his desire because he has changed his mind. Both before and after, he is favourably disposed to Scottish victory but when victory is secured we say, not that he desires it, but that it pleases him. The technical term ‘pro-attitude’ has something of the generality we want, covering liking and disliking, endorsing and regretting as well as desire and aversion. But I will continue to speak with the vulgar in terms of desiring, liking, caring and concern.

We care about different things, desire different things and like different things. And this is true not just interpersonally of different people but intrapersonally of individual people at different times and even at the same time. This is the Fact of Conflict, one of the most basic ingredients of human experience. But while we differ greatly we also agree about a huge amount. The things I like and want are very like the things most others like and want in countless ways. And the things I like and want today are very like the things I like and want at other times. These are deep and important facts about the kind of animal we are. We could call them the Fact of Stability and the Fact of Commonality. These facts make a big difference to the way normative concepts get going. For in virtue of these facts the things we like and want are not just unconnected particular things but kinds of things, things with features in virtue of which we are stably disposed to like and want them. Because of the facts of stability and commonality there are all kind of identifiable general features of things that make us care for the things that have them. We might call these features desirability characteristics. Given the role of such features in our practi-

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cal lives, it is unsurprising that we have concepts to capture them. Some of these are relatively specific and ‘thick’, such as the concepts that pick out certain traits of character we are stably disposed to admire. But it is also unsurprising that we should have a concept for the feature of having some such stably favour-inducing feature and to have such a concept is to be at least some distance along the way to having a concept of goodness. And it is now very natural indeed for invocations of these features, specific or otherwise, to play a central role in explaining our actions and our concerns.

Stability and commonality are not the whole story of course. There is plenty of conflict, intrapersonal and interpersonal. We try to resolve this conflict by pursuing certain kinds of intrapersonal and interpersonal unity and harmony. So, we might say, as well as the Fact of Stability and the Fact of Commonality, there are what we may call the _Aspiration to Unity_ and the _Aspiration to Community_. These are, in effect aspirations to build upon, deepen and extend such stability and community, respectively, as already exist. These aspirations are important to the kind of animal we are. We aspire to constitute a well-functioning moral community and we aspire to an intrapersonal analogue of that which is something very like what some recent philosophers understand when they speak of the unification of our agency.7 We try to achieve such unification consensually by building on our existing affective commonalities by codeliberative means. And this codeliberative enterprise is one whose basic currency comprises just the general features of things we find ourselves stably agreeing in favouring. That’s how it comes about that such features play an absolutely central role not merely in explaining but also in justifying our actions and our concerns.

The foregoing is, necessarily in this context, the merest sketch of an account of how our normative concepts work. But, it’s important to notice that it’s an account that makes it abundantly clear why the reasons of which such concepts speak should be predominantly, as Parfit puts it, object-given rather than state-given. It’s also an account that is wholly consistent with naturalism, requiring no metaphysical commitment to anything except

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the natural facts about our psychologies and the natural facts about the features of things we favour or dislike. From the point of view of the universe, we could say, this is a story where there are no reasons, just a bunch of warm-blooded mammals that care about all kinds of things in highly complex and patterned ways. But, of course, that is not our point of view. For we are creatures who inhabit a conceptual landscape shaped by those complex and patterned concerns. To inhabit such a landscape just is to inhabit a space of reasons. A space of reasons is what a space of desires becomes when those desires are our own. And, to the extent that the Facts of Stability and Commonality hold, these reasons may be, in one important sense, objective.

Normative concepts then are the children of stability and commonality while remaining contested in numerous contexts. The intra- and inter-personally constituted normative world I inhabit may contain regions from which I am disaffected or disengaged. To the extent that this is so, certain parts of the conceptual repertoire available to me may sometimes become enclosed, as it were, within inverted commas. But much remains from which I am not thus disengaged, constituting a space of normative concepts that is shared, stable under reflection and more or less coherently integrated. That is what makes me one of the animals that can understand and respond to reasons.

The pattern and the complexity are crucial. Compare two cases:

1. Algernon wants a bicycle. He wants it because he wants to be able to travel to the shops and to work and he wants to get to work faster than he can walking because there are so many other things he wants to do with his day. Because he cares about his carbon footprint, his health, and his petrol bills, he wants a bicycle and not a car even though a car would be faster still. And at weekends he can go for rides in the countryside and he likes doing that and it is good for his health and he wants to spend weekends doing things he enjoys that are good for his health. When Algernon, caring as he does about all this stuff, reflects critically on his desire for a bicycle, it is a desire he is stably disposed to endorse.

2. Jack wants a bicycle. If he had one he would never ride it. He lives on a small island he never plans to leave where everything he needs is in easy walking distance and there are no paths that he could cycle on. He is simply and altogether
unaccountably assailed by an unmotivated desire for a bicycle.

Algernon’s desire for a bicycle makes sense, we may say, in several ways. In the first place it broadly coheres with a vast web of other desires, both relatively local and relatively global, that Algernon has. In the second place his desire and very many of the other desires that support it are desires that he is stably disposed to endorse on reflection. In the third place they are desires that make good sense to us. There is a high degree of normative commonality between him and us. So the space of desires he inhabits is also, viewed from within, a space of reasons and it is a space of reasons that we inhabit also. So we can properly say of Algernon but not of Jack that his desire for a bicycle is supported by reasons and we do this in a way comfortably consistent with a strictly naturalistic metaphysics.

Parfit doesn’t want to allow naturalistic ‘desire-based’ understandings of normativity the right to appeal to something like:

\[(G) \text{ for some desire to give us a reason, we must have some reason to have this desire. (On What Matters, §9)}\]

Such theories cannot make sense, he urges, of the thought that we have reasons to want or to care about things. This is why he thinks that they are bleak, committed to the view that nothing matters (On What Matters, §11). All this we may now contest. The naturalist has every right to G: Algernon has many reasons to buy a bicycle and Jack does not precisely because Algernon has many reasons to want one and Jack has none. Perhaps Jack has a weak reason to buy one if the frustration of his desire for one is very unpleasant and distracting but that is at least as good a reason to just get rid of the desire if he can. Whereas Algernon’s desire would be harder to get rid off because it draws support from such extensive regions of the space of reasons he inhabits.8

Parfit finds all this implausible partly because of his excessively foundationalist picture of practical reason. For G to be true, on a desire-based theory, the reason we had for our desire would have to be based on some other desire. He then reasons:

8 See Millgram, Practical Induction, chapter 2.
For this other desire to give us this reason, we must have some reason to have this desire which must in turn be provided by some other desire. We cannot have an endless chain of such desire-based reasons and desires. Any such chain must end with some desire that, according to desire-based theories, we have no reason to have. So if desire-based theories appealed to (G), they would have to claim that we never have any reason to do what would fulfil any of our desires. As before this claim contradicts their view and is clearly false. (*On What Matters*, §9)

But the support enjoyed by Algernon’s desire for a bicycle doesn’t come from a single desire or a chain of such single desires. It comes from his desire’s broad coherence with the whole landscape of his affective and normative world. If we were somehow to regard the human world from a dispassionate third person perspective (the perspective perhaps of Frankfurt’s imagined creature whose response to the world was ‘utterly and uniformly flat’), we would see causes but no reasons. We’d see these strange human creatures leading their lives with all their various passions and motivations, sometimes living well by their own lights, sometimes badly. We wouldn’t see a world where anything mattered. And yet, metaphysically, ontologically and scientifically speaking we would be seeing all there was to see. And of course there would be nothing bleak about this. After all, if nothing matters, nothing matters, including the fact that nothing matters.

In any case I do not, as will by now be clear, think that is how our talk of things mattering is best understood. For this remote and disengaged perspective is not our perspective. We’re not dispassionate observers of these odd human creatures. We’re them. And, being them, it makes every kind of sense for us to say we have reasons to write thank-you letters, educate our kids and wrap up in cold weather. And we can say what these reasons are in enormous detail. Parfit can articulate these reasons and so can I and what he would say when asked to do so would probably be to a great extent the same as what I would. Only the philosophical gloss would be different. When we’re engaged in this business of justifying particular normative commitments we seek to show how they make good rational sense in the light of other commitments we have. We then try to deliberate and live as well as we can by our lights. These lights are just our likings and desires of course – or
at least it is our likings and desires that light them up – but that
doesn’t mean they are about our likings and desires. What we care
about ranges far wider and is far richer than the satisfaction of our
own present desires as such. What’s good about what I desire,
from the standpoint of my desires themselves, is almost never that
I desire it.9

We justify particular normative commitments – which accord-
ing to me are a species of desire – by references to the normative
landscape constituted by the others. But how do we justify the
whole caboodle? We don’t really. There’s a familiar philosophical
thought about explanation whereby we can explain certain fea-
tures of the physical world with reference to other features of the
physical world but if we ask for an explanation of the whole damn
thing there’s nothing to be said. It’s really just a silly question. I
won’t take a view on whether that’s right but something analogous
seems to me plausibly true of the normative realm. Ask me to
justify some particular normative judgement and I may have a lot
to say. Ask me to justify them all and I can’t say much. It’s just the
way I am. Or, if we enjoy a little commonality, it’s ‘just us’. But if
we’re lucky enough to like ourselves well enough, that may, from
our perspective, just be OK. The whole caboodle is something I
might stably reflectively endorse but it makes little sense to ask
after my reason for doing so.

The rival camp doesn’t have a better story. When you ask us to
justify particular normative claims, Parfit and I might sound much
the same. But he thinks what he’s doing is describing a domain of
irreducible normative facts and I don’t. However, the general
question arises here too: why should anyone care about these
irreducible normative facts? The realist can always reply simply
that it is an irreducible normative fact that we ought to and that,
if we take care not to confuse normative and motivational force,
that should be enough (On What Matters, App. A, §21). But it
surely isn’t. If you ask me, ‘Why should I care about my kids’
education?’ and I reply that you should care about this because
there is an irreducible normative fact to that effect, that is, you will
rightly protest, not really a reply at all. A like answer seems no less

220. See also Allan Gibbard, Wise Choices, Apt Feelings (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990),
chapter 8; and James Lenman, ‘Preferences in their Place’, Environmental Values, 9 (2000),
feeble when addressed to the grander question why we should care about the irreducible normative facts.10

3. Parfit’s case against desire-based theories turns a lot on various counterfactual examples involving strange creatures who have no desire to avoid future agony or stranger creatures with colours for names whose strongest desire is precisely that they undergo such agony. I’ll say a little more about such cases later. Here I just want to note a passage where Parfit writes that desire-based theorists

might... suggest that my example is no objection to their theory, because this case is purely imaginary. Every actual person, they might say, wants to avoid all future agony.

He says various things in response. Here I note just one. This is that

it seems likely that some actual people do not want to avoid all future agony. Many people care very little about the prospect of future pain, if this pain would be far enough in the future. Of those who have believed that sinners would be punished with eternal agony in Hell, many have tried to stop sinning only when they became seriously ill, and Hell seemed near. (On What Matters, §9)

There’s a sense in which this is obviously right. Plenty of believers in hell-fire do indeed sin their hearts out until the prospect of death is imminent. And the mind-set of the teenage smoker whose concern for their health decades hence is inadequate to motivate a serious effort at a change of habit is familiar to us all. However it’s true in most such cases that people of this sort are willing to admit they are being irrational by their own lights. This, it may credibly be suggested, is true of them in virtue of the fact that they are disposed reflectively to endorse desires that would favour very different forms of behaviour, even though weakness prevents them aligning their behaviour to what that reflection supports. If the most familiar and commonplace

such cases are of this kind, this takes much of the sting out of this response. For cases like this are not counterexamples to sophisticated desire-based views.

4. Now for a counterfactual story of my own. I want you to imagine an ideal. I want you to imagine a moral community that is perfectly just – according to your favourite story of what justice is – comprised of agents who are all highly virtuous – according to your favourite story of what virtue is. How did all this come about? Well, you might like to imagine it coming about because this is a world where there are irreducible normative facts about virtue and justice, because these people are somehow capable of detecting these facts and because their knowledge of these facts somehow motivates them to act in conformity with them. But that’s not how I want you to imagine this coming about.

Instead I want you simply to imagine that the following facts obtain. The picture of virtue painted by your favourite story of what virtue is is also a picture of the sort of people these people most stably and wholeheartedly want to be. The picture painted by your favourite story of what justice is is also a picture of the kind of society they stably and wholeheartedly want to be part of. The conception of virtue with which they wish to comply is one that demands they each act to bring about and sustain such a society and do not merely free-ride on the contributions of others to that end. And they are psychologically together enough to act in accordance with these stable and wholehearted desires. And so they do. And they are all frightfully happy.

There are many things to say about this, alas imaginary, picture. Here’s a very modest claim. It isn’t bleak. Indeed it’s as far from bleak as can be, an embodiment of the ideal state described by Rawls where

> Ethical norms are no longer experienced merely as constraints, but are tied together in one coherent conception. The connection between these standards and human aspirations is now comprehended and persons understand their sense of justice as an extension of their natural attachments, and as a way of caring about the collective good.11

What is sunny is, among other things, the possibility that the Aspirations to Unity and Community might, in this way, succeed. What is bleak is, among other things, the possibility that they might fail.

5. We can imagine bleak worlds of many kinds, worlds whose people are so messed up, by our own lights, that it would be a catastrophe for us to find ourselves living in one. These worlds would be bleak by our lights. But they might not be bleak by the standards set by the desire portfolios of those who live there, or of some of those people, or of some of those people at some times. Think of the circumstance where I will be spending the rest of my life in a state of unrelieved suffering but right now that is what I most deeply, strongly and wholeheartedly desire. Presumably I will come to regret living in this world as the suffering gets underway. But right now it’s exactly the world I most want to find myself in.

This is the sort of counterfactual that troubles Parfit. Much of his discussion of desire-based theories centres around such odd circumstances in which people have crazy, or morally repellent, or self-destructive desires. Desire-based theories, he urges, have the consequence that these people would have reasons to act in crazy or morally repellent or self-destructive ways and he takes that to have the force of a reductio.

There is scope here for bullet-biting. Suppose the admirable inhabitants of my ideal world discover that one of them has gone a little funny and positively desires terrible things to happen to him in the future. If they are desire theorists, his fellow inhabitants might well concede that he has every reason to seek to bring such things about. But they could still consistently insist that they have every reason to help him – in the long term – by seeking to frustrate these self-destructive desires, for their altruistic concern for him applies impartially to his present and future selves. Or suppose a Hitler arises among them, determined to kill and cruelly subjugate millions. They might concede that this Hitler does indeed have reason to achieve these aims. But they could still consistently insist that they, motivated as they are by an altruistic concern for the millions thus threatened, have reason to thwart and oppose him. So what they would say about such motivational deviants might then strike us as a little odd, but what they have reason to do about them might very well not.

But the bullet need not be bitten. As will now be clear to most readers, I favour the expressivist rather than the reductionist wing
of the Humean tradition. A while back I said I thought it was roughly true that where there is a world of passion, rich, structured and reasonably coherent in the way human passions typically are, there is a world of reason. I’m sticking to that claim. But here’s how I think we should develop it. Where there is a space of desires there is a space of reasons but only when those desires are your desires. From the third person perspective where there is a space of desire there is merely a space of desire. But when those desires are mine, everything changes. A space of reasons is the form a space of desires assumes when viewed from within.

When we look at it this way, it’s plausible to make what is of course a highly familiar claim about normative concepts and normative language. Such concepts and such language do not describe our desires but rather express them. This expressivist turn tames the relativism that troubles Parfit. Hitler, I can now say, had no reason to murder those millions of Jews. Blue has no reason to pursue a life of unrelieved suffering. When I say this I express the passions in my own soul, not in those of Hitler or of Blue. So Parfit is right – here and in his earlier ‘Reason and Motivation’ – to urge against Williams that we can make good sense of external reason claims, though it is not the sort of sense Parfit supposes. Williams’ worries that such claims would amount to no more than browbeating retain this much force. If Hitler or Blue has no internal reason to desire other than as they now do, it may then be singularly pointless waste of time to tell them – privately at least – they have nonetheless reason to do this. No useful conversational purpose would be thereby served. But there may be abundant reason to express this view to all kinds of other people for all kinds of reasons. And at least in worlds that are not too bleak, where adequate levels of commonality exist, such cases where normative conversation becomes simply futile can be expected to be the exception not the rule.

6. Parfit discusses expressivism in an Appendix where he makes various critical remarks about the view of Allan Gibbard. I will now

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seek to explain briefly why I think none of these remarks very telling.

(a) The Supposed Dilemma of Circularity or Arbitrariness. Parfit writes:

Gibbard claims that, when we are trying to decide whether some act is rational, we are trying to decide whether to accept some imperative. That may suggest that we are trying to decide whether we have sufficient or decisive reasons to accept this imperative, or whether we ought rationally to accept it. But this account would then be using the very concepts – reason, ought and rational – which it claims to explain.

. . . Gibbard avoids this objection. On Gibbard’s account, we do not try to decide which imperatives we ought to accept, or have reasons to accept. We merely decide which imperatives to accept. That is like deciding what, for no reason, we shall do now. When we make such a decision we are not deciding what we ought to do, but are merely ‘concluding what to do’.

Gibbard rejects certain Naturalist theories on the ground that they prevent our asking certain questions that we want to ask. The same is true, I believe, of Gibbard’s theory. . . For example, we can’t ask what it would be rational for us to do. (On What Matters, App. A, §19)

But of course we can ask this. Parfit represents Gibbard as avoiding a worry about circularity by accepting that questions of what to do and desire are rationally arbitrary. As I argued in section 2, this is just wrong. Algernon, unlike Jack, has many reasons to want a bicycle and there is no obstacle whatever to the expressivist so characterising him. Of course we use the concept of reason our theory seeks to explain but that is hardly circularity. The whole point of seeking to explain it is so that we could continue to use it. The body of norms Algernon accepts is complex and systematic and overlaps substantially with norms I and others accept in such a way that we constitute a community of shared normative judgement within which these reasons make good sense to us. This is a matter of the coherence of certain normative thoughts – expressivistically construed - with a broader web of normative thoughts – expressivistically construed – as well as of shared reflective endorsement. The worry only arises, as I argued above, at the level
of our reasons for accepting the whole caboodle and at that level no one has anything very helpful to say.\textsuperscript{14}

(b) \textit{A Kind of Objectivity}. Blackburn has argued that expressivism can make sense of the mind-independence of value\textsuperscript{15}: it need not understand either our normative commitments or their grounds to be about us or our desires. And Gibbard, as Parfit notes, makes similar points appealing to the possibility of desires not conditional on their own persistence.\textsuperscript{16} Parfit denies that this kind of non-conditionality amounts ‘to a kind of objectivity’ (\textit{On What Matters}, App. A, §19). What Blackburn calls ‘mind-independence’ and Gibbard ‘acceptance-independent validity’ is certainly a core feature of the phenomenology of our normative experience. Whether or not we chose to label this a ‘kind of objectivity’, Blackburn and Gibbard’s work in making clear expressivist sense\textsuperscript{17} of this is a major philosophical achievement. This is not to contest that there is certainly more to what we normally understand by objectivity. For example, there is the kind of objectivity that arises from stability and commonality. The expressivist can make sense of this too as I have urged above.

(c) \textit{Moral Epistemology}. Parfit argues (ibid.) that expressivists can make no good sense of normative epistemology, that we can make no good sense of talk, in normative contexts, of credibility and self-evidence. I have argued elsewhere that the role of intuition in normative epistemology and the authority we accord it is something that expressivism is \textit{peculiarly} well-placed to make sense of.\textsuperscript{18} In a nutshell, I think this. Two things are true of me. (1) I am deeply and stably unwilling to accept any set of rules for the moral regulation of my community that permit torture. (2) It seems utterly obvious to me that torture is wrong. For the expressivist these two facts are not so distinct. When we see this, we can account for the authoritative role we accord ‘intuition’ in normative thought with none of the mystery that, on nonnaturalist accounts like Parfit, attaches to moral epistemology.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Spreading the Word}, pp. 217–220
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Wise Choices, Apt Feelings}, chapter 8.
\textsuperscript{17} For relevant citations see note 9 above.
(d) *Epistemic Norms*. Parfit also writes:

Just as ‘what it is rational to do settles what to do . . . what it is rational to believe settles what to believe’. Remember next that, on Gibbard’s view, ‘to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact, either truly or falsely’. If there could not be truths about what it is rational to believe, as Gibbard’s view implies, it could not be rational to believe anything including Gibbard’s view. (*On What Matters*, App. A, §19)

This is impossibly quick and dirty and so will I be. To go back to my starting point we are creatures who care about stuff. One of the things we care about is getting our science, our philosophy, our everyday beliefs right. We care about the truth. That desire is widely shared, stable under reflection and coheres with the broader web of normative judgement. That is why we are so very interested in the epistemic norms that speak to this concern, in the system of hypothetical imperatives that is all our epistemic norms need to be. And these, insofar as they do indeed speak to our epistemic aims, are, like other hypothetical imperatives, just as objective as can be.\(^{19}\)

(e) *Arbitrariness Again*. The false alarm about arbitrariness rings again in the following passage of Appendix A, §19.

There is no expressivist sense in which anything could be rational so there can be no point in asking which acts are rational. Nor could anything matter. Just as our normative beliefs can only mimic the search for truth, things could only mimic mattering . . .

Gibbard’s analysis would indeed transform our view. If we became convinced that there are no truths about either what is rational or about reasons or about what is right or wrong, we would cease to believe that normative questions could have answers. Our normative thinking would then be easier, since we would cease to worry that we might be getting things wrong. But that would not make our thinking *more effective*, since it would not help us to get things right. There would be nothing to get right.

\(^{19}\) For an account of epistemic normativity that is broadly Humean in spirit, see Hilary Kornblith, *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), chapter 5.
It is hard not to take this as just question-begging. The expressivist has an understanding of what it means to say that there are reasons. Parfit has another. According to the expressivist the claim that there are reasons, as Parfit understands it, is false. So, Parfit concludes, much as he did earlier with naturalists, expressivists are in the business of denying that there are reasons. And he is shocked, shocked at the bleakness of this contention. But of course we are in the territory of caricature. Suppose that you and I go on holiday to the North Pole in January. Suppose I pack my thickest winter woollies and you pack only a bikini. Then I am smart and you are dumb: I have got my normative thinking right and you have got yours wrong. I hope I have adequately adumbrated here how an expressivist interpretation of this judgement would go. On what if anything might be wrong with such an interpretation these remarks of Parfit shed no light. What is being proposed is not, in any sense, a debunking or a repudiation of normative discourse but a distinctive philosophical understanding of it, one with which these remarks of Parfit’s fail effectively to engage.

More of the same follows:

On Gibbard’s naturalistic picture, . . . there are no truths about what we have reasons to want or do. This view is not fantastic. But, as I have argued, it is bleak. (ibid.)

The first sentence of the foregoing is false, an expression of a confusion of expressivism with non-cognitivism. Given that, the second is little more than a rhetorical flourish.

The form of robust non-naturalist normative realism favoured by Parfit is one of a number of philosophical positions where it is very common for those who believe them not only to consider them intellectually compelling but to think it would be catastrophically awful were they wrong. But I don’t get it. There are various things in this context that it seems to me would be bleak. One is that the idea of a moral community might simply make no sense. I think it does make sense and that we can describe such a community simply by describing a community of agents whose

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motivations are in the right sort of shape. A little earlier on I very briefly tried to do just that. There is no need to invoke irreducible normative facts at any point. Another thing that would be bleak is that, even if such a community is possible in theory, it is not in practice sustainably achievable by creatures like ourselves.\(^{21}\) However optimistic we may be on that score, I can’t readily see why the truth of a robust, Parfitian normative realism could credibly be expected to make us more so. Here, as elsewhere, we should expect to find no secure comfort in an obscure and panicky metaphysics.\(^{22}\)

