# Normativity, agency, and life

James Barham

*Department of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame, 100 Molloy Hall, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA*

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

There is an immense philosophical literature dealing with the notions of normativity and agency, as well as a sizeable and rapidly growing scientific literature on the topic of autonomous agents. However, there has been very little cross-fertilization between these two literatures. As a result, the philosophical literature tends to assume a somewhat outdated mechanistic image of living things, resulting in a quasi-dualistic picture in which only human beings, or the higher animals, can be normative agents properly speaking. From this perspective, the project of 'naturalizing normativity' becomes almost a contradiction in terms. At the same time, the scientific literature tends to misuse 'normativity,' 'agency,' and related terms, assuming that it is meaningful to ascribe these concepts to 'autonomous agents' conceived of as physical systems whose behavior is to be explained in terms of ordinary physical law. From this perspective, the true depth of the difficulty involved in understanding what makes living systems distinctive *qua* physical systems becomes occluded. In this essay, I begin the attempt to remedy this situation. After some preliminary discussion of terminology and situating of my project within the contemporary philosophical landscape, I make a distinction between two different aspects of the project of naturalizing normativity: (1) the 'Scope Problem,' which consists in saying how widely in nature our concept of normative agency may properly be applied; and (2) the 'Ground Problem,' which consists in rationalizing the phenomenon of normative agency in terms of the rest of our knowledge of nature. Then, in the remainder of this paper, I argue that the Scope Problem ought to be resolved in favor of attributing normative agency, in the proper sense of those words, to living things as such. The Ground Problem will be discussed in a companion paper at a later time.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

---

When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*

---

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I will explore the possibility of giving a realistic account of normative agency, properly so called, as an essential property of life. Needless to say, this is a highly ambitious and contentious thesis. I will not be able even to touch upon all of the many questions raised by my thesis here, much less provide anything like a proof. What I will do, however, is discuss two specific issues, which—together with a third issue I hope to discuss on a future occasion—I trust will constitute a *prima facie* case for at least according my thesis serious consideration.

First, in Section 2, below, I will deal with some key definitional issues. What exactly do we mean by the concepts of 'normativity' and 'agency'? How are the two concepts related? And what might it mean to 'naturalize' normativity and/or agency? In reply to this last question, I will distinguish eliminativist and epiphenomenalist versions of 'naturalized normativity' from the realistic project of giving an account of the place in nature of normativity, considered as an objectively existing phenomenon. Furthermore, I will argue that if we take the realistic project of naturalizing normativity seriously, then we must distinguish between what I will call the 'Scope Problem'—namely, the problem of determining the proper scope of application of our concept of normative agency—and the 'Ground Problem'—the problem of characterizing the physical ground of normativity in nature.

Then, in Section 3, I will investigate the Scope Problem, arguing that the proper scope of application of our concept of natural agency is to life—that is, to living systems, or organisms—as such. A similar investigation of the Ground Problem will be undertaken elsewhere.

*E-mail address:* jbarham@nd.edu

## 2. What do we mean by 'normative agency' and what would it mean to 'naturalize' it?

The paradigm case of 'normativity' is undoubtedly moral pre-scription and proscription, expressed through the terms 'ought,' 'should,' 'must,' and related locutions. For example: 'Thou shalt not kill.' Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see that the moral 'ought' is only a species of a wider genus of normativity that applies to human actions generally. For example: 'You *ought* to use a hammer (to pound nails)'; 'You *should not* smoke (to avoid coming down with lung disease)'; 'You *must* practice, practice, practice (to get to Carne-gie Hall)'; and so on. What all of these normative claims have in com-mon is the prescription or proscription of an action, considered as the appropriate means to attaining an end. In this respect, we can see that norms are instrumental in character. They seem to be essen-tially involved with furthering the actualization of ends by specify-ing actions conducive to such actualization. That is, norms connect ends to the appropriate means, and wherever there is a means–end relationship, there is normativity in this sense. If norms are real, as opposed to merely notional, then the 'specifying' of appropriate actions that they do makes a real contribution to influencing or determining real events in the world. To this extent, then, norms are analogous to ordinary causes—physical forces—but, as I shall ar-gue below, they cannot be construed as literally being ordinary causes or physical forces. In fact, the crux of the problem of norm-ativity lies in understanding how something that is not an ordinary cause or physical force can nevertheless have a real influence or determinative power over events in the world.

The norms I have been discussing so far are clearly nonmoral, since actions attain a moral quality by virtue of their impact on the welfare of other human beings—an impact which actions like using a hammer, giving up smoking, and practicing one's musical instrument lack (at least directly). Moreover, moral and nonmoral norms are both 'instrumental oughts,' since they both connect ends to the appropriate means.[1] Following the customary terminology, we may distinguish 'moral actions' from merely 'prudential actions.' Let us call, then, nonmoral instances of prescription and proscription of actions instances of the 'prudential ought.' It follows that the genus 'instrumental ought' consists of two species, the 'moral ought' and the 'prudential ought.' And so the 'moral ought,' resident in our paradigm of normativity, is in fact only a fairly restricted special case of a much more general phenomenon. This is also evident from the fact that all 'moral oughts' prescribe or proscribe human actions, but not all prescriptions or proscriptions of human actions are moral in character. Many of them are prudential. In other words, outside of the sphere of moral action lies the vast sphere of prudential action where normativity is equally present under the guise of the 'instru-mental ought.' This entitles me to ignore the 'moral ought' here, in spite of the fact that it is our paradigm of normativity. Everything I say hereafter about normativity should be understood as applying in the first instance to the 'prudential ought.'

Another issue that must be addressed is the nature of what I have been calling 'prescription' and 'proscription.' As we have seen, human beings often express normativity by means of such auxiliary verbs as 'must,' 'ought,' or 'should.' In addition, the imperative mood of the verb is often employed for this purpose. Moreover, norms may be codified in the form of written or unwritten laws, rules, maxims, and other types of commands, prohibitions, and recommendations. All of these types of normativity seem to involve language and human intentionality in a fundamental way. This is an issue that is orthogonal to the moral/prudential issue. That is, the seemingly linguistic character of normativity considered as

prescription would seem to restrict the 'prudential ought' to human actions as surely as the 'moral ought' is so restricted. After all, how can there literally be prescriptions in the absence of a prescriber, commands in the absence of a commander, and so on?

And yet the notion of normativity does appear to be more widely applicable than just to the human case. For instance, it is natural to say things like: 'Dogs *ought* to get plenty of exercise'; 'Hearts *should* beat in sinus rhythm'; and 'Plants *must* have water.' This makes it seem as though there is a kind of *requirement* in some natural systems that has nothing to do essentially with either language or human intentionality. This notion of require-ment is more generic than prescriptivity, or, in other words, human language-mediated prescriptivity stands in relation to this broader notion of normative requirement as species to genus. If that is so, then it is natural to ask: What is the nature of this more generic form of normative requirement? This is another way of posing the question that lies at core of this project, and will comprise the main topic of Section 3, below.

Yet another distinction I wish to make involves two different senses in which the terms 'normative' and 'normativity' are some-times used. I will call them the 'narrow' and 'broad' senses. In the narrow sense, normativity is simply the 'instrumental ought' that we have been discussing up until now, namely, the idea of requirement—that is, the fact that there is something that an agent is required to do in a certain situation in order to attain a particular end. Though the notion of normative 'requirement' is already broad with respect to the narrower notion of 'prescriptiv-ity,' it is nevertheless comparatively narrow in relation to another way that the term 'normativity' is sometimes used—namely, as an umbrella term to designate a family of closely related concepts for which we seem to have no collective name in colloquial English. We use the term 'normativity' in this broad sense *faute de mieux*, and the resulting ambiguity can give rise to confusion if we are not careful. The family of related concepts that are sometimes re-ferred to as 'normative' in this broad sense is specified by the net-work of mutual implication existing among a number of concepts that are analytically contained in the concept of 'action' in the normative sense of 'acting for a reason' (as well as the concept of 'agency,' understood as the power to 'act for a reason'). 'Norm-ativity' in this broad sense encompasses such concepts as purpose, value, well-being, need, and being a reason for action, in addition to the narrow 'instrumental ought.' In Section 3, below, I will attempt to justify the claim that there is in fact a natural kind corresponding to this umbrella concept of 'normativity.' For now, I would like to make a more limited point regarding the claim that normativity—in both the narrow and broad senses of the term—is intimately connected to agency.

First, take the narrow sense of normative requirement as the 'instrumental ought.' If normative requirement is the fact that an agent ought to (or should or must) do something in a given situation in order to attain a particular end, then normativity in the narrow sense clearly implies agency. But what about the converse case: Does agency imply normativity? If actions are held to be somehow controlled or guided by reasons, and if reasons are held to be metaphysically distinct from causes, then reasons may be said to indicate what should, or ought to, be done in a given situation. This does make it seem as though agency implies normativity. Unfortunately, there are two difficulties with this claim.

The first difficulty lies in determining the kinds of things to which the concept of normative agency may be properly applied.

---

[1] This is true even if one interprets 'moral oughts' as categorical imperatives, because the categoricity of a moral imperative lies in its supremacy over other imperatives (i.e., its unconditionality), not in its pointlessness. Categorical imperatives, too, prescribe or proscribe actions, and *ipso facto* connect ends to means (for example, where the end may be construed as 'doing one's duty').