

# Normative Consistency<sup>1</sup>

ALLAN GIBBARD

Richard B. Brandt Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy  
University of Michigan

Sometimes norms conflict. Anthropologists in the wake of Boas maintained a strong form of ethical relativism: The ethical practices of a culture are right for people in that culture, and it is always illegitimate to interfere with the practices of a culture not one's own.<sup>2</sup> This normative stance conflicts with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims some ethical standards as universally valid—standards at odds with the practices of some cultures. Since claims of ethical relativism and universal rights conflict, a person who made both such claims would be inconsistent.

My aim here will be to inquire briefly into normative consistency and inconsistency. What is inconsistency, and what is wrong with it—and also, what isn't wrong with it? I need to talk, then, about what normative claims are, what normative assertions mean. When we talk about norms, we often mean something social, but we can think of the social phenomena involved as consisting in interactions of individuals. Individuals have normative convictions, and interact and influence each other. How, then, are we to understand individual normative convictions?<sup>3</sup>

Normative convictions come in a wide variety: moral judgments, judgments of rationality in action, judgments of rationality in belief, judgments as to what's honorable and what's disgraceful, to name a few. Philosophers have until recent decades mostly stuck to morality. They have also talked of rationality in belief, but that has been in quite

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1 Read 30 April 2011, as part of the symposium "Norms and Their Conflicts."

2 For writings in this vein, see, for example, Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (1934) and Herskovits, *Man and his Works* (1948). I won't here try to analyze exactly what they might have been claiming and how accurate my rough gloss here is. For one analysis of kinds of ethical relativist theses, see Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (1959).

3 I develop much of the picture I sketch here in my *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (1990). I elaborate aspects of it in *Thinking How to Live* (2003) and in *Meaning and Normativity* (2012).

separate terms. Philosophers C. L. Stevenson and A. J. Ayer thought that moral judgments are emotions or attitudes, understanding attitudes as steady dispositions to respond emotionally in certain ways.<sup>4</sup> Judging that something is wrong, they thought, consists in an attitude of disapproval, identified by the feelings involved. This emotivism, though, can't be entirely right: I can feel disapproval of something that I think isn't really wrong. I remember that when the Beatles first got a following and young men started wearing their hair long, I felt disapproval, but I couldn't see that it was wrong. I felt disapproval but believed it not to be wrong. Believing something wrong consists rather, we might say, in believing that feelings of disapproval toward it are *justified*.<sup>5</sup> Note that speaking this way involves two things: identifying an emotional attitude one can have toward something, and deeming it justified. I'll focus here on the latter, the justification of feelings.

If we could understand the notion of being justifiable—or warranted, as I'll say—this would give us a systematic way of marking out the normative in general. For an act to be *rational*, we can say, intending to do it must be warranted. Likewise, for a belief to be rational, the belief must be warranted. As for morality, what is it, say, for an action to be morally blameworthy? Feelings of blame for that act toward its agent must be warranted. For an action to be admirable, we can say, admiring it must be warranted. This way of understanding terms like “admirable” was proposed by the mid-century philosopher A. C. Ewing.<sup>6</sup> Philosopher T. M. Scanlon has a related way of marking out such judgments, in terms of *reasons* to do, believe, or feel things, but I'll stick with warrant, since I think the two ways of talking are equivalent.<sup>7</sup> I take it that the normative beliefs of individuals have as their subject matter what acts, beliefs, and feelings are warranted.<sup>8</sup>

Saying this leaves us, though, with a big conceptual job: how to explain this basic concept of warrant. Some philosophers say that being warranted is a non-natural property, and we can discover what things

4 Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936, 1946), chap. 6; Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (1944).

5 Brandt proposes this in “Moral Valuation” (1946), and elaborates some aspects of the proposal in his *Ethical Theory* (1959).

6 Ewing, “Non-Naturalistic Analysis of Good” (1939).

7 Scanlon, *What We Owe* (1998). In my *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (1990), I propose defining a “reason,” in the sense (as Scanlon puts it) of what counts in favor of an attitude, in terms of being warranted. Those like Scanlon who use counting in favor as their basic concept also need a concept of there being sufficient reason, and this amounts to being warranted. Thus if I am right, talk in terms of reasons is intertranslatable with talk of being warranted. Another major writer who takes reasons to hold attitudes as basic is Parfit in *On What Matters* (2011).

8 This is the view I take in my *Wise Choices* (1990). My “Moral Feelings and Moral Concepts” (2006) offers a related but somewhat different view.

have this non-natural property by thinking sufficiently hard in the right ways.<sup>9</sup> Such claims strike many of us as mystifying, but still, I agree, important arguments and considerations drive us in this direction. Attempts to say what “warranted” could mean in psychological or other empirically respectable terms seem to fail. Whether slavery is morally wrong, for instance, is a different matter from whether anyone disapproves or thinks it wrong. The first people to maintain that slavery is wrong clearly weren’t saying that people disapprove of it, for they could very well have known that no one else did and yet stick to their guns. We could try dismissing normative judgments as a heap of confusions that should be dropped, but that would be making a “should” claim that is itself normative. Also, it means that there’s no sense in asking what matters in life or how it makes sense to conduct ourselves, and it’s hard to see how to ponder what to do if one genuinely takes such a view.

I take it, then, that we should try to understand such questions in a way that doesn’t take their answers to be matters of scientific fact, and also doesn’t take them as claims about non-natural properties, but still takes these questions as ones we must ask ourselves and think about, with some hope of gaining greater wisdom. If I’m right that such judgments concern warrant for acts, beliefs, and feelings, then how are we to understand this basic normative concept of warrant? We can’t offer a straight definition couched in the sorts of empirical, non-normative terms that figure in scientific findings, I have been saying, and so we’ll have to find another way. I think there are two such ways, one psychological and the other conceptual.

One of these involves a strategy like that of Ayer and Hare. Emotivists like Ayer thought that moral assertions express attitudes. We can say uninformatively that moral assertions express moral judgments, and so this amounts to saying that moral judgments consist in emotional attitudes. I have said why I reject this: one may have such an attitude and think it unwarranted. But we can follow this broad strategy of explaining a concept by saying what sort of state of mind it expresses.<sup>10</sup> What is the state of mind, then, of judging that a feeling toward something is warranted? I may be on the wrong track in asking this, and perhaps there’s no such distinctive state of mind. If there is, moreover, I ought to be handing it over to empirical psychologists—and they might

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<sup>9</sup> Some recent examples are Scanlon, *What We Owe* (1998) and Parfit, *On What Matters* (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Hare, who was not an emotivist like Ayer, adopts this broad feature of Ayer’s strategy; see his *Language of Morals* (1952) and *Moral Thinking* (1981). The state of mind that moral “ought” statements express, according to Hare, is one of preference that is universal, in the sense that it doesn’t depend on who is who.

tell me that there's nothing unified behind the phenomena that I'm pointing to. Still, here, I think, is a phenomenon we encounter in our experience: one can feel disapproval and yet be convinced that the feelings are unwarranted. What is the psychological nature of this state of mind? Some philosophers say it consists in believing that the feeling has a certain non-natural property, but I don't expect non-natural properties to figure in a scientific investigation. In any case, if there indeed is such a state of mind and we get a scientific description of it, then we can explain what claims of warrant mean in an indirect way: we can say that talk of "warrant" figures in expressing states of mind like these—expressing in the same way as much other talk serves to express beliefs on matters that are open to empirical investigation.

A second way to try to explain the concept of warrant is via its logic. Logic is a matter of what's consistent with what, and what's inconsistent. Now there is something inconsistent, I want to say, in being convinced that I must do a thing and deciding otherwise. Suppose I'm convinced that I must right now call my doctor to learn the result of a biopsy, but I don't call. In my stilted terminology, that I *must* call now means that not calling now is unwarranted. In not calling, I do something that I judge to be unwarranted, and this is inconsistent. Such patterns of inconsistency, I say, are what characterize normative judgments as normative.

In both these regards, psychological and conceptual, normative thinking is like planning. Suppose I've been drinking, and so plan not to drive home. I express a planning judgment when I tell myself, "Don't drive home." I can also tell myself, "I mustn't drive home." These are very closely related, even though it seems that with the first, I don't state a fact but rather tell myself what to do, whereas with the second I state how things are regarding what I must do. Still, what I do with one of these I can do with the other. They amount, in a way, to the same thing. Each mental act controls what I do, temptations and the like aside: they each tend toward my not driving home. So I propose that, roughly, we can explain what "I mustn't drive home" means by saying that believing it amounts to a planning state, namely, ruling out driving home. Other plan-laden states of mind can be built up starting with such straight states of planning, and then combining and rejecting states of mind. So my broad claim is this: Normative judgments amount to restrictions on combinations of non-normative beliefs and plans.

What is this talk of "amount to"? I want to say two things. First, even though perhaps we mentally code plans and beliefs as to what we must do differently, there are psychological parallels. First, they carry similar action tendencies. When the time comes, we tend to do what we

plan to do and, likewise, we tend to do what we believe we must do. Second, the logic of plans and “must” beliefs is the same. I understand logic itself as normative: one thought entails another if, invariably, one mustn’t believe the one and disbelieve the other. Now one mustn’t believe one must do a thing and plan otherwise, and one mustn’t plan to do something and believe one mustn’t do it. There are some complications here that I have skipped over, when there’s more than one thing that one believes it would be all right to do on the occasion, but plans and judgments as to what to do and what one must do are closely tied by relations of consistency, and these make for a kind of normative equivalence.

The picture I have been sketching, I should warn you, is controversial.<sup>11</sup> My aim here, though, is to assume the kind of story I have been telling, and turn to conflicts of norms. What *is* normative inconsistency, and what kind of defect is it?

Take first straight empirical claims that are in a clear sense true or false. Their peculiar defect is this: if claims are inconsistent, there is no way they could all be true. Such inconsistent sets of beliefs aren’t always a bad thing; they may inspire people to fine actions or provide comfort that otherwise is not to be found. Their defect is a narrow one: independently of how things are, their falsehood is guaranteed just by the nature of the claims. Now philosophers who think that normative claims are just straight factual claims in some special subject matter—non-natural, perhaps—will say that the defect of inconsistent normative claims is to be explained in just this same way. The claims can’t all be true.

It’s right, no doubt, that they can’t all be true, but I don’t think this really gets to the root of the matter. If normative judgments amount to the sorts of restrictions we adopt in planning, we should understand consistency in normative judgments as the kind of consistency that applies to plans. It is inconsistent, for instance, to plan to do something and reject doing it. No policy for action fits both states of mind. More generally, a set of planning states is inconsistent if its effect, for some occasion for action, is to rule out everything that one can do on that occasion. Take, for instance, a planning never to do anything that would upset anyone. That’s inconsistent with a belief that on some possible occasions, anything one can do will upset one person or another. Since there are at least possible occasions when anything one did would upset someone, this planning state is inconsistent by itself taken as a plan for any possible occasion. In general, then, planning is inconsistent if on some possible occasion for action, it rules out every alternative open to one.

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<sup>11</sup> Parfit objects in *On What Matters* (2011), and Scanlon in “Reasons and Decisions” (2006).

This is the kind of inconsistency that is peculiar to planning—and so what is wrong with it? If an occasion arises for which it rules out everything one could do, it gives no guidance. One may not notice the inconsistency, and then one's planning judgments will seem to offer guidance, but the guidance may lead in ways that frustrate the plan in other respects. Perhaps no such situation of self-frustration will arise, as it turns out, but on this score I think planning inconsistency is much like inconsistency in non-normative beliefs. It needn't be a bad thing on balance, since achieving consistency may be more trouble than it's worth. Inconsistencies may not infect one's thinking about the things that matter. Still, they do have the potential to vitiate or mess up the guidance that plans can offer.

Inconsistency isn't the worst quality one's judgments can have. They can be consistent but terrible. The same goes for straight judgments of empirical fact: A paranoid might achieve greater consistency than most of us, but with judgments that are false and delusional, ill supported by the evidence. Similarly with plans: Suppose a Nazi achieved full consistency in his plans, plans that involve great sacrifice to achieve his warped goals. The planning states of ordinary good people are better, even though ordinary plans are bound to be inconsistent in various ways. Inconsistency guarantees imperfection, but consistency isn't a guarantee of anything better.

Consistency in planning makes very strong demands, and indeed the classic decision theory of Ramsey, Savage, Arrow, and Peter Hammond shows this.<sup>12</sup> The young Frank Ramsey invented this theory in its essentials before his death in the 1920s, and he indeed thought his subject matter to be a kind of consistency in action. Other great thinkers later reinvented the theory and enhanced it. How airtight the arguments in this tradition are is a matter of great controversy, but to my mind, decision-theoretic arguments have great power. Consistent planners for belief and action, the arguments seem to show, decide as if they have numerical degrees of belief and degrees of valuing—subjective probabilities and utilities, as they are called in the trade. Consistency, though, doesn't come easily, if it comes at all. The research programs of Kahneman, Tversky, and others indicate that powerful heuristics are at work in judgment and decision, and that these heuristics aren't consistent.<sup>13</sup> We are prone, then, to inconsistencies that work systematically. We can work to correct their deliverances,

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12 See Ramsey, "Truth and Probability" (1931); Arrow, "Choice in Risk-Taking Situations" (1951); Savage, *Foundations of Statistics* (1954, 1972); Hammond, "Consequentialist Foundations" (1988).

13 See, for instance, Kahneman and Tversky, "Prospect Theory" (1979); Tversky and Kahneman, "Framing of Decisions" (1981).

exercising other mental capacities. Our aim in doing this, however, shouldn't be at base to achieve consistency for its own sake—since, as I say, a consistent set of judgments can be worse than an alternative set that is inconsistent. The aim is to get things right—and if we got things perfectly right, we would be consistent. Consistency doesn't entail correctness, but perfect correctness is consistent.

So if the norms we accept aren't consistent—as they are bound not to be—how can we proceed? That, in a way, is the central problem of philosophy. Consistent convictions worth trusting are hard to achieve, and various conceivable ways one might be consistent in one's convictions disagree with each other; we can't coherently accept all of them. Philosophy consists in proceeding from the inconsistent judgments we are bound to make, and scrutinizing how we should revise them. John Rawls spoke of “reflective equilibrium,” a state of judgment we can work toward ideally where we have taken all considerations into account, so that no considerations would change our judgments.<sup>14</sup> Again, though, as with consistency, some possible states of reflective equilibrium would be terrible—reflective equilibrium as a Nazi, for instance. The real insight behind talk of “reflective equilibrium” is that there is no formula for coming to the convictions we ought to have. Otto Neurath said we rebuild a boat in mid-ocean, plank by plank.<sup>15</sup> All we can do, ultimately, is to pursue our thinking and planning, putting a critical trust in our powers of judgment. We can correct our judgments only by exercising our powers of judgment, such as they are. Sometimes, indeed, we find new ways of systematizing a subject matter, and such inventions can greatly enhance our powers of thinking. The invention of classical decision theory is a good example of this. Still, we can only conclude that a mode of analysis enhances our powers of judgment by exercising powers of judgment, and these powers are at best only somewhat to be trusted. That is the situation we face when we turn to fundamental inquiry, and it applies to normative judgments along with all our other judgments. I can give no general formula for resolving puzzling conflicts of norms; we can only get ourselves clearer what the coherent alternatives are and apply our powers of judgment to selecting among them. Normative inquiry amounts to inquiring how to live, and so deciding how to resolve such conflicts is thinking systematically about central problems of living and understanding.

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14 John Rawls introduced the term “reflective equilibrium” in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), crediting Nelson Goodman's *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* (1955) for the idea.

15 Quine quoted Neurath as the epigram to his *Word and Object* (1960).

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