

Happiness and Meaning: A Plurality of Values Rather Than a Conflict of Norms¹

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When Pat Suppes asked if I would be willing to take part in a panel on norms and their conflicts last year, I asked him what he had in mind—what did he mean by a norm, and what kinds of conflicts among norms did he hope the panelists would discuss? Pat said that he preferred to let the panelists interpret the topic as they saw fit. So let me begin by offering an interpretation of the topic—of the idea of a norm and of conflicts among them. Then I shall proceed to give some reasons for scuttling away from that topic or at least from the idea that most of the practical challenges we face are best formulated in those terms.

In my field, moral philosophy, reference to norms, or more frequently to normativity, has been ubiquitous since the publication, first, of Allan Gibbard's book *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* in 1990, and then of Christine Korsgaard's *The Sources of Normativity* in 1996. Indeed, within moral philosophy these terms are so common that most moral philosophers don't appear to notice that the words "normative" and "normativity" are not part of most people's working vocabulary. Further, they seem to use "normative" interchangeably with "evaluative," or at least to treat talk of norms and normativity as exhaustive of all substantive talk on matters relating to value. In my dialect, however, these terms are quite different. A norm, as I understand it, is a rule or a principle or a standard, something one can apply or follow. A value, on the other hand, is a desirable characteristic or property of situations or people or objects. To value something is to cherish it, or at least to judge it good, and worthy of attention, concern, promotion, or respect. Though of course the values one has will be related to the norms one accepts, their relation is not simple or obvious. That a person values

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freedom or education or opera, for example, is far from sufficient to tell you what norms she accepts with respect to them.

Norms, understood in this way as rules or standards, conflict when they instruct us to take two mutually incompatible paths, to do two mutually inconsistent things. The variety of types of norms and of types of conflicts among them is vast. In light of this, there may be little useful or illuminating to say in answer to the question “What should one do when norms conflict?” when it is asked at a completely general level. Still, when cases or types of cases in which norms are seen to conflict are presented to me, one response occurs to me frequently—viz., that it may be a mistake to formulate the problems at issue in terms of conflicts of norms in the first place. Although there is an important place for norms in regulating and guiding our activities, and there are occasions when norms problematically conflict, the tendency to describe or interpret difficult practical decisions in terms of conflicts of norms seems to me to far outstrip the range for which such an articulation makes sense.

Let me offer two examples to illustrate what I mean. The first, fortuitously appropriate to a panel in Philadelphia, comes from a conversation at a dinner party I attended concerning the decision to move the Barnes Foundation from Barnes’s estate in a Philadelphia suburb to a site in the center of town. The dinner guest who brought it up presented the issue as a moral dilemma—a conflict between two obligations, as he put it, the one being an obligation to honor the terms of legally valid wills, the other an obligation to make important cultural resources available to the public. To me, however, the formulation of this difficult practical issue in terms of a conflict of norms seems misleading and unhelpful. That we ought to honor the terms of valid wills is, to be sure, a legal norm, and one that seems to be supported by moral reasons. But there is no valid norm, as I see it, having to do with providing access to great art, with which the norms about wills can plausibly be thought to conflict. Of course, it is a great *good* for art to be open and accessible to the public—it is an important *goal*, or *value*. But there is no norm to the effect that a governing body or court ought to do whatever it can to provide excellent cultural resources to its citizens unless that be understood to include a *ceteris paribus* clause so large as to include the condition (which is presumably never met) that no other important considerations or competing goods are at stake. There may well be features of this particular case that make the question whether to honor Barnes’s will in this matter a difficult one, features that may even justify making an exception to the legal norm in this case. But the reasons that would justify this decision, if there are such, will involve the details of the case, and it will be at

best a distraction and at worst a misrepresentation to formulate the salient considerations in terms of a general norm that conflicts with the norm that instructs us to honor legal wills.

I take my second example from the research connected to a well-known debate between Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan about how to understand and assess moral development in children. In the research studies of both Kohlberg and Gilligan, subjects were offered a case devised by Kohlberg that is known as the “Heinz Dilemma,” a scenario in which the wife of a man named Heinz will die if she cannot get a certain drug. Heinz and his wife cannot afford the drug and so Heinz considers whether to steal the drug to save the life of his wife.

It is quite natural to construe this case as a conflict of norms. We ought not to steal, but then again, we ought to do whatever we can to save a life, or at least to save the life of a loved one, such as, in this case, Heinz’s wife. Indeed, on my understanding, the assumption that this is *the* natural and right way to conceive of Heinz’s problem was part of the point of Kohlberg’s decision to use the example as a means for assessing his subjects. Insofar as the dilemma was interpreted as a conflict of norms, the case presented his subjects with an opportunity to reveal how they thought about these norms. For example, it could reveal what they thought was the source of these norms’ authority, and how they used reasoning to balance or weigh the norms’ relative importance.

While understanding Heinz’s dilemma in terms of a conflict of norms may not be a bad way to approach Heinz’s problem, it may be best to put this form of thinking aside to resolve it. Focusing on the norms at stake rather than the particulars of the case encourages one to try to order the norms *as* norms: saving lives is more important than refraining from stealing, one might think, and so the life-saving norm should trump. But this will not do—for consider the case where Heinz would have to steal not a drug but a kidney. Alternatively, one might try revising the norms so as to build in qualifications and exceptions that will replace the initially plausible but conflicting norms with more fine-grained and accurate norms that no longer conflict. The correct norm against stealing, one might suggest, will make an exception in cases in which the theft would be a theft of property and what is at stake is a matter of life and death. But any aspiration of eventually arriving at a formulation of norms that will anticipate and so avoid every *possible* conflict would be unrealistic. And, at any rate, the grappling with competing values and goals that must go into the process of revising the initial norms is exactly the consideration that applies to Heinz’s problem directly. The more fine-grained and nuanced norms we arrive at will not help us “solve the case”—they simply express in a normative form the solution we have already reached.

One might agree that seeing these practical dilemmas in terms of conflicts of norms rather than tensions between values may not ultimately help us to resolve the practical questions at issue, but wonder whether anything serious is at stake. At worst, to formulate the practical issues in these terms wastes a bit of time, since as soon as the conflict between apparent norms is recognized, the idea that we should take a step back and consider the values underlying the norms will occur to one relatively quickly. In many cases, I think this is just what happens. But there are dangers in our too ready tendency to interpret practical difficulties in terms of conflicts of norms nonetheless.

One danger, indeed, is suggested by Gilligan's research itself.² By taking it for granted that the right way to conceptualize Heinz's problem was to think of it as a conflict of norms, researchers were led to dismiss another way of approaching the problem—a way more commonly observed in girls and women. Thus, for example, one subject of Gilligan's suggested that Heinz talk to the pharmacist and try to work out a payment plan or some other compromise. To one who saw the issue as a conflict of norms, the girl's response seemed to reflect an inability or unwillingness to accept the terms of the case with which she was asked to deal. But as Gilligan points out, one might just as easily see the girl as thinking, commendably, "outside the box," looking for a solution that doesn't fit within the channels into which the normative formulation of the problem tends to lead our thinking.

In the space remaining, I want to bring up a different concern—viz., that our tendency to understand practical decision-making in terms of norms and their conflicts may keep us from fully understanding our own aims and values, and lead us to a distorted understanding of ourselves. To illustrate this, I want to focus on choices that can plausibly be seen as falling entirely within the domain of self-interest.

Here again are two examples:

First, a woman fresh out of law school has the good fortune of receiving two job offers—one is from a prestigious corporate firm, which pays well, has excellent benefits, beautiful offices, and high status; the other is from a nonprofit organization devoted to environmentalist concerns. The pay and working conditions are worse, but she would be working to defend and protect causes she believed in, engaging in projects that would be expressive of her values and, if successfully carried out, would be a source of pride.

Second, a well-established scholar is invited to contribute an essay to a volume honoring an old mentor of his. He agrees, and writes a draft of an appropriate paper with relative ease over the course of a

2 See especially Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

few weeks. The paper is good, but it could be better. If he devotes more time and energy to it, he could strengthen and clarify the argument, and express his reasoning and conclusions with more elegance and flair. On the other hand, he is a busy man. If he sends the article off, he can move on to other projects, or, alternatively, take a weekend off, to go on a nature walk and watch the Final Four on television.

The lawyer must decide which job to accept; the scholar whether to revise his paper or submit it. How should they decide?

Upon first hearing these cases, it may be tempting at least to wonder whether the subjects of these examples are faced with a conflict between a moral or professional norm on the one hand and a norm of self-interest on the other. One might think, for example, that a moral norm favors the environmentalist job in the first case, and that a professional norm favors revising the article in the second. But let us assume that the subjects rightly believe that in these particular cases no such norms apply. There is no *obligation* to take the morally more admirable job, and the article in its current form is already good *enough* to meet whatever standards of academic integrity and merit one could reasonably impose. In these respects, nothing stands in the way of the subjects' doing whatever they want. But the subjects must *decide* what to want. How should they decide, or how should we advise them?

Some might respond by saying that I have already answered this question, when I said, a moment ago that the subjects may do "whatever they want." Implicit in this, one might think, is a norm that instructs them to consult their preferences—presumably by introspection—and choose whichever is strongest. A second answer, similar in spirit to the first, is that the subjects should do whatever they think will make them happiest, where happiness, if not itself identified with the satisfaction of a person's preferences, is identified with pleasure or with some broader notion of positive qualitative experience. Happiness, in other words, is identified with feeling good.

These are, I believe, the most common ways we think about personal choices—both our own and other people's—in situations in which we believe no non-self-interested norms apply or constrain us. And we typically explain our choices to others in terms that take this way of thinking for granted. Thus, for example, if our lawyer takes the lower-paying and less comfortable job, she may explain why by saying that she expects to find it more fulfilling; and if our scholar chooses to forego the weekend off to revise his paper, he might offer the justification that he couldn't rest easy if he let the paper go in its less-than-perfect form.

But I think these ways of characterizing our choices and the ways we make them is unfortunate. Often, I believe, they misrepresent what

is really moving us to choose the way we do; and if, in some cases, their representations are accurate, that may be even worse.

Such characterizations are inaccurate when they present someone's choice as being motivated or justified by either a brute non-rational preference or by considerations of what the subject thinks is best for him, when in fact what is really motivating the person's choice is an interest in something independent of himself, which he takes to be independently valuable, and so worth acting to promote or to honor. Motivating our lawyer, perhaps, is her value in the preservation of wilderness; moving our scholar is his respect and admiration for high-quality research. Of course, having these values will affect how our subjects feel about the options before them—if they realize their values (and they realize that they realize them) they will experience a degree of fulfillment or self-satisfaction; if they fail to realize their values, they may be unhappy with themselves. But it is not the prospect of feeling good that, on the picture I am offering, is motivating or justifying their choices; it is rather the prospect of doing good.

Moreover, if, as I believe, decision-making on such a basis as this is an extremely common and important part of the way people live their lives, this suggests that the conceptions of well-being that we tend to take for granted may be inaccurate, too. Specifically, it seems to me that many if not most people who have the luxury of caring about more than their basic needs want to live in a way that they can look back on with pride, and to be able to see at least some part of their life as engaged productively with projects and activities that others would be able to appreciate and respect as worthwhile. We might put this by saying that, for many if not most people, well-being not only involves a good share of happiness or pleasurable experience, but must also contain a good share of meaning.

Thus, on the model of choice that I am suggesting we do and should apply to some of our decisions, we sometimes act to realize or promote values that are other-directed even when no external norms require us to do so. The lawyer acts for the sake of the environment; the scholar for the sake of good research. But in doing so, they may also be enhancing their own self-interest, and may be doing so even if these choices do not make them happier than they would be if they chose otherwise. This is so because acting in a way that positively engages with projects the actors care about because they are worthwhile gives meaning to the actors' lives even when it does not (especially) give pleasure, and because meaning is as much a dimension of a good life as pleasure is.

What has all this to do with norms and their conflicts? Perhaps not much. But, if I am right that we have a pervasive tendency in both our

personal and our academic discourse to misrepresent and distort our motives and our reasons in the ways I have sketched, then it is not unreasonable to speculate about why this might be so, and it is my suspicion that part of the explanation comes from our disposition to formulate practical reasoning in terms of the application of norms.

Thus, for example, it is not surprising that if one thinks that deliberation is largely a matter of seeing what norms apply to our situation and figuring out how to resolve conflicts between norms when such conflicts arise, one will think that once all the norms are satisfied, all that's left is value-free permissible choice. In other words, it will be natural to think that in the absence of any non-self-interested authoritative norms, the only reasons one can have for one's choices must be reasons of self-interest, or that the only form of rational deliberation left at that point is to "consult one's preferences" where that means something like introspecting to see which of one's relevant desires is strongest. I have argued, however, that there are plenty of reasons that are not norm-governed but are nonetheless neither reasons of self-interest nor reasons that are grounded in brute desires or preferences. Rather, we have reasons to act that are grounded in our perceptions of specific people, objects, and activities, as worthy of attention and care.

The tendency to conceive of practical rational choice in terms of the application of norms seems also to encourage us to conceive of our most important categories of value in unidimensional terms, for seeing values in unidimensional terms makes it easier to apply norms with respect to them, and even allows us to identify our value in *X* with a norm that instructs us to maximize *X*, thus encouraging us, for example, to identify well-being or self-interest with happiness and happiness with pleasure and the absence of pain. Again, I have argued that this distorts and oversimplifies what most of us would regard as significant ingredients of self-interest. While happiness is an important dimension of the good life, meaningfulness is another.

Many people react to this suggestion favorably, but immediately, almost reflexively, want to know more. Specifically, they want to know, "Which is more important, meaning or happiness?" "What relative weights should we assign to one dimension as compared with the other?" Even if my space weren't limited, I would decline the invitation to answer these questions. They seem yet again to reflect a tendency or desire to treat practical choice in terms of the application and balancing of norms. As I have been arguing all along, before giving in to that tendency, much less taking it for granted, we should step back and consider whether it is the most illuminating and useful way to proceed.