Meeting 1: Introduction

I. The Right and the Good

A classic question in moral theory: “Is the good prior to the right, or the right prior to the good?”

Most of us first encountered this question in Rawls, but versions of it were a staple of ethics textbooks for most of the twentieth century (dating back at least to a textbook co-authored by Dewey in 1908).

There are three elements being asked about in this question:
1. The good;
2. The right;
3. A relation of priority between them.

How we understand these elements depends on whether we are asking the question in a semantic, a conceptual, or a metaphysical key. Are we asking about the definition of certain normative words? About the composition of certain normative concepts? Or about the metaphysical dependence of certain normative categories (where I used ‘category’ to cover entities, facts, properties, relations, operators, and so on)?

When understood semantically, the good is commonly taken to encompass at least the following: ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘better’, and ‘best’.

When understood semantically, the right is commonly taken to encompass at least the following: ‘ought’, ‘obligatory’, ‘permissible’, and ‘forbidden’.

The old way of understanding answers to our classic question:

Consequentialist (or, as they often used to be called, teleological) moral theories take the good to be prior to the right, whereas deontological (or, as they sometimes used to be called, formalist) moral theories take the right to be prior to the good.

We no longer understand things this way, because many deontological theories (such as Kant’s, on one currently popular way of interpreting him) also take the good to be prior to the right.

The way I myself prefer to understand the consequentialist vs. non-consequentialist divide (following Pettit, Scanlon, and others):

Consequentialists hold that (i) the good is prior to the right, and (ii) all goodness is “to be promoted”; whereas non-consequentialists deny (i), (ii), or both.

I first got interested in this general question when I wrote a series of papers arguing that the same distinction can be applied in epistemology, and that a vast number of contemporary epistemologists have been assuming without argument that (i*) the epistemically good (such as: having true beliefs) is prior to the epistemically right (such as: having epistemically justified beliefs), and (ii*) all epistemic goodness is “to be promoted.”

Moreover, I argued that such an assumption of epistemic teleology—or, as I now prefer to call it, epistemic consequentialism—should be rejected.

I also wrote a very long paper arguing that we do best to understand the question “Is the good prior to the right, or the right prior to the good?” in a metaphysical key.

But while I was writing these papers, I started to get worried about whether the classic division of normative categories into two groups—the evaluative ones (“the good”) and the deontic ones (“the right”)—is as harmless an assumption as it is commonly taken to be.
II. A Third Family of Categories?

On the traditional way of viewing things, we can divide the normative categories into two groups:

- **the deontic categories:**
  - required/mandatory/obligatory
  - permissible/permitted/allowed
  - forbidden/impermissible/prohibited
  - right
  - may
  - can
  - ought
  - should
  - must
  - wrong
  - right
  - may
  - can
  - optional/merely permitted (i.e. permitted but not required)
  - supererogatory (i.e. beyond the call of duty)?
  - a duty/a right/a wrong
  - a claim/a liberty/a power/an immunity (i.e. the Hohfeldian categories)
  - a directed duty (i.e. a duty to someone to do something)
  - directed wronging (i.e. wronging someone)

- **the evaluative categories:**
  - good
  - better
  - best (in the sense of: better than all the rest)
  - bad
  - worse
  - best (in the sense of: at least as good as all the rest)
  - neutral/indifferent
  - equal in value
  - worst (in both senses)
  - on a par?
  - at least as good as
  - second best
  - at least as bad as
  - at least second best
  - no better than
  - good enough
  - no worse than
  - better than most

As is now standard practice, I am using ‘normative’ as an umbrella term encompassing all categories of these sorts, and I am using ‘evaluative’ to mean ‘pertaining to value’ (not ‘pertaining to evaluation’).

There is an older usage of ‘normative’ that picks out only what I am calling the deontic, and there is an older usage of ‘evaluative’ that picks out all of what I am calling the normative.

Note that each family of these categories might come in various “flavors”: for example, maybe we can distinguish moral requiredness, legal requiredness, prudential requiredness, epistemic requiredness, etc.

Note, also, that we can make various distinctions within a given category: for example, maybe we can distinguish intrinsic goodness from extrinsic goodness, final goodness (i.e. goodness as an end) from instrumental goodness (i.e. goodness as either a causal or a constitutive means), etc.

Where do we fit (no pun intended) the following normative categories into our two-part grouping?

- **some other normative categories:**
  - admirable/credible/desirable/responsible
  - blameworthy/praiseworthy/trustworthy
  - shameful/disgusting/fearsome

Authors seem to be generally confused about what to do with the above categories:

Some authors categorize responsibility, blameworthiness, and praiseworthiness as deontic categories.

Some authors categorize admirability, desirability, and preferability as evaluative categories.

Many authors categorize appropriateness/aptness/warrantedness/justifiedness as deontic categories, but when they do, there is disagree over whether they are forms of permission or of requiredness.
I myself used to think of justifiedness as a form of permission, and hence as a deontic category.

What first started getting me worried about this assumption was a seemingly minor issue that comes up during my course PHIL 173: Metaethics when I teach Allan Gibbard’s Wise Choices, Apt Feelings.

Gibbard takes ‘is rational’ to be a direct and flavorless form of endorsement that is equivalent in meaning to ‘makes sense’, ‘is called for’, ‘is warranted’, and ‘is apt’.

In ch. 3 of his book he does three things.

First, he offers an analysis of wrongness in terms of blameworthiness along roughly the following lines:

\[(G_1) \text{ An act is wrong iff the agent would be blameworthy for it were they in a fully responsible state of mind while doing it.} \]

Second, he offers an analysis of blameworthiness in terms of apt emotions along roughly the following lines:

\[(G_2) \text{ An act is blameworthy (or morally reprehensible) iff it is rational (or apt) for the agent to feel guilt for having done it, and rational (or apt) for others to feel anger (or indignation, or resentment) at the agent for having done it.} \]

Third, he offers an expressivist account of what it is to think that an act, belief, or emotion is rational (or apt) along roughly the following lines:

\[(G_3) \text{ To think that an act, belief, or emotion is rational (or apt) is to accept a system of norms that permits it.} \]

But when Gibbard puts (G2) and (G1) together, something surprising happens. One would expect that combining these two theses would yield

\[(G_{2+3}) \text{ To think that an act is blameworthy (or morally reprehensible) is to accept a system of norms that permits guilt on the part of the agent and permits anger on the part of others.} \]

But what Gibbard in fact concludes is this:

“...to think an act morally reprehensible is to accept norms that prescribe, for such a situation, guilt on the part of the agent and resentment on the part of others” (p. 47, underlining mine).

I have a hard time hearing ‘prescribe’ in this sentence as meaning anything other than ‘requires’. (Moreover, see the middle of p. 56 for a place where Gibbard pretty clear uses ‘prescribes’ to mean ‘requires’.)

This leaves us with a number of interpretative possibilities:

- **first possibility**: Take Gibbard’s use of ‘prescribe’ here to be a mistake and replace it with ‘permit’. Then we interpret him as holding (G2), (G3), and (G2+3).
  
  **problem**: To hold that when I do something morally reprehensible, then guilt on my part is permitted seems way too weak. Aren’t I, if anything, required to feel guilty?

- **second possibility**: Take Gibbard’s use of ‘prescribe’ to be correct and interpret him as having made a mistake when he formulated (G2). So on this reading, he accepts (G2*), (G3), and (G2+3*).
  
  \[(G_{2*}) \text{ An act is blameworthy iff it is irrational for the agent not to feel guilt for having done it, and irrational for others not to feel anger at the agent for having done it.} \]

  \[(G_{2+3*}) \text{ To think that an act is blameworthy is to accept a system of norms that requires guilt on the part of the agent and requires anger on the part of others.} \]

  **problem**: To hold that when someone else does something morally reprehensible, then anger on my part is required might be too strong. Am I really rationally required to be angry at everyone else for every single blameworthy thing I think they’ve ever done?
• *third possibility:* Take Gibbard to be best interpreted as putting forward a mixed view on which guilt is required and anger is permitted. So on this reading, he accepts \((G_2**)\), \((G_3)\), and \((G_{2+3**})\).

\((G_2**)\) An act is *blameworthy* iff it is *irrational* for the agent *not* to feel guilt for having done it, and *rational* for others to feel anger at the agent for having done it.

\((G_{2+3**})\) To think that an act is *blameworthy* is to accept a system of norms that *requires* guilt on the part of the agent and *permits* anger on the part of others.

*problem:* The lack of normative symmetry between guilt and anger causes trouble for other parts of Gibbard’s system, and also removes an attractive feature of his analysis of blameworthiness.

• *fourth (and most radical) possibility:* Hold that Gibbard should stick to \((G_2)\) but give up on \((G_3)\), because fittingness/aptness/warrant is not a deontic category: it is neither a form of permission nor a form of requiredness.

Gibbard would never go this last route, because his entire expressivist system is built up around an expressivist treatment of deontic forms of normativity. (Indeed, one pressing challenge for his system is that he seems committed to conceptually analyzing all normative notions in terms of deontic notions.)

But increasingly I have come to think that this fourth possibility is where Gibbard should have gone.

More generally, there are a variety of areas where interpreting fittingness/warrant/justifiedness as a type of permission seems, in some cases, too weak and as a type of requirement seems, in other cases, too strong.

An example from epistemology: I am justified in believing a large number of propositions on the basis of my current perceptual experiences. For many of these propositions (such as: *<Such-and-such bit of my perceptual field has slightly more orange in it than such-and-such other bit of my perceptual field>*), it seems too strong to say that I am required to believe them. But for others of these propositions (such as: *<There is something in front of me>*), it seems too weak to say I am merely permitted to believe them. (We will return to this issue on Apr. 24.)

I also became convinced by an old article by Richard Brandt (which we will read on Feb. 28) that the normative ‘-ible’/-able’ adjectives can be semantically analyzed in terms of fittingness:

‘admirable’ means ‘fitting to admire’;
‘credible’ means ‘fitting to believe’;
‘desirable’ means ‘fitting to desire’;
‘reliable’ means ‘fitting to rely upon’.

Not all ‘-ible’/-able’ adjectives are amenable to this analysis; some are purely descriptive and have a different analysis:

‘visible’ means ‘can be seen’;
‘replicable’ means ‘can be replicated’.

It now seems to me that many normative ‘-worthy’, ‘-ful’, ‘-ing’, ‘-ive’, and ‘-some’ adjectives can also be defined in terms of fittingness in a similar way:

‘blameworthy’ means ‘fitting/appropriate to be blamed for’;
‘shameful’ means ‘fitting to be ashamed of’;
‘disgusting’ means ‘fitting to be disgusted by’;
‘persuasive’ means ‘fitting to be persuaded by’;
‘bothersome’ means ‘fitting to be bothered by’.

Moreover, once you pay attention to them, you realize that these sorts of normative adjectives are *everywhere:* they constitute a large part of our normative lives, but they are sorely under-theorized by normative theorists.
Thus one hypothesis that I would like to explore in this seminar is the suggestion that there is a third family of normative categories beyond the evaluative and the deontic that has its own distinctive structure and basis:

- **the fittingness categories:**
  fitting/appropriate/apt/merited/warranted/justified/deserved/proper/correct
  acceptable/accountable/admirable/admissible/answerable/credible/deplorable/desirable/eligible/
  enjoyable/enviable/excusable/lamentable/plausible/preferable/reliable/responsible/risible
  blameworthy/choiceworthy/noteworthy/praiseworthy/seaworthy/trustworthy
  awful/dreadful/shameful
  amusing/annoying/disgusting/frightening/infuriating/interesting/promising/surprising
  attractive/persuasive/suggestive
  bothersome/fearsome/irksome/tiresome

I should flag that this hypothesis might in the end not work out. Some significant challenges it faces:

- If ‘proper’ and ‘correct’ are fittingness terms, then ‘right’ (and ‘wrong’) probably should be as well.
- Is ‘valuable’ a fittingness term? But isn’t it a canonical evaluative term?
- Is ‘permissible’ a fittingness term? But isn’t it a canonical deontic term?

We will start by considering the deontic and the evaluative categories, and we will investigate some of their (alleged) distinguishing characteristics. Some potential examples:

1. The deontic categories **being required** and **being permitted** are duals of each other (agent A is required to φ iff A is not permitted to not φ), but it is not clear the evaluative categories exhibit duality.
2. The evaluative categories **being good** and **being bad** are opposites of each other, but it is not clear that any deontic categories are related in this way.
3. The evaluative categories come in degrees, but it is not clear that the deontic categories do so as well.

We will then consider whether the fittingness categories have their own distinguishing characteristics.

Finally, we will consider various debates in ethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of emotion where authors have appealed to fittingness notions and investigate what difference it makes to those debates how we understand the nature of those notions.

**III. Back to the Right and the Good**

Not only will thinking about these normative categories help us in any discipline in which those categories are employed, but it also changes how we think about our classic question in moral theory, “Is the good prior to the right, or the right prior to the good?”

Already this question is too simplistic: it neglects the possibility that both are basic, the possibility that some subset of the right depends on the good, which in turn depends on a different subset of the right, and so on.

But even setting those complications to one side, things start looking importantly different if we have three families of normative categories: the required, the good, and the fitting.

Now our question becomes: “What are the priority relations between the required, the good, and the fitting?”

For instance, we can distinguish two types of consequentialism:

- **weak consequentialism:** The required depends on the good, where all goodness is “to be promoted.”
- **strong consequentialism:** The required depends on the good, where all goodness is “to be promoted,” and the good does not depend on anything else normative.
IV. Some Other Families of Normative Categories

Some authors (including my past self) distinguish the following from the evaluative and the deontic categories (where the term ‘hypological’ is due to Michael Zimmerman, from the Greek hypologos meaning ‘hold accountable or liable’):

- **the hypological categories:**
  - responsible
  - blameworthy
  - praiseworthy

I now think it is better to think of the hypological as a small subset of the fitting.

Another family of categories that have taken center stage in recent normative theorizing:

- **the rational categories:**
  - There is a *pro tanto* reason for A to φ.
  - A has *pro tanto* reason to φ.
  - There is more reason for A to φ than to ψ.
  - A has more reason to φ than to ψ.
  - There is sufficient reason for A to φ.
  - A has sufficient reason to φ.
  - There is decisive/conclusive reason for A to φ.
  - A has decisive/conclusive reason to φ.
  - It is reasonable/rational for A to φ.
  - A’s φ-ing is rational.

I think this family of normative categories cross-cuts our other categories:

- *Having sufficient reason* is a type of permission, and hence a deontic property.
- *Having decisive reason* is a type of requirement, and hence a deontic property.
- *Being reasonable* is a fittingness property.

It is unclear to me whether *pro tanto reasons* are their own normative category or, structurally, a type of evaluative category.

One final family of normative categories that we regretfully will not have time to investigate in detail:

- **the aretaic categories:**
  - virtuous
  - kind/honest/courageous/patient/open-minded/etc.
  - vicious
  - cruel/dishonest/cowardly/reckless/close-minded/etc.

It may well be that the aretaic categories are a fourth family of normative categories beyond the primary three we will be studying.

V. A Terminological Plea

I would really like to find a term that stands to the fitting as ‘deontic’ (meaning ‘pertaining to duty’) stands to the required and ‘evaluative’ (meaning ‘pertaining to value’) stands to the good.

One natural candidate has already been appropriated by philosophers for another purpose.

‘Axiology’ is used by philosophers to mean ‘the study of value’.

But the term derives from the Greek axia meaning ‘merit’ or ‘worth’, so really ‘axiology’ should mean ‘the study of merit or fittingness’ and ‘axial’ should mean ‘pertaining to merit or fittingness’.

I could try to take back the term ‘axial’, but probably that ship has sailed.

So if any of you who know some Greek or Latin have a better suggestion for a term meaning ‘pertaining to fittingness’, I would love to hear it!

(Extra credit for the best suggestion?)
VI. Tappolet and Smith on Evaluative vs. Deontic Concepts

The Christine Tappolet and Michael Smith readings I assigned are two of the only places I know of in which the issue of what distinguishes the evaluative from the deontic is explicitly discussed.

Note that both Tappolet and Smith frame the issue in a conceptual key, in terms of what distinguishes two families of concepts (rather than two families of properties, relations, and other categories).

Note, also, that both Tappolet and Smith include among the evaluative concepts several concepts that I would prefer to classify as fittingness concepts (DESIRABLE, in Smith’s case, and DESIRABLE, ADMIRABLE, and CONTEMPTIBLE, in Tappolet’s case).

Tappolet and Smith together offer seven reasons for thinking that evaluative concepts can be distinguished from deontic concepts:

1. Deontic claims entail the possibility of holding some agent responsible, whereas evaluative claims do not (Smith, pp. 10–11; compare Tappolet, pp. 1797–98).

   The exact connection, if any, between deontic modes of assessment and agency/responsibility is an issue we will return to on Apr. 10. But note that on my way of viewing things, Smith is characterizing deontic concepts in terms of a connection to one particular fittingness concept.

2. The evaluative concepts are gradable (they admit of comparative and superlative forms) and they come in degrees, whereas the deontic concepts do not (Tappolet, pp. 1795–96).

   Note that Tappolet is here following the common practice of equating gradability with degreelessness, but I will argue on Feb. 14 that these are distinct properties.

   In reply to the objection that killing is “more prohibited” than lying, Tappolet insists that we should understand the claim being made here as a difference in priority rather than a difference in degree: when one is forced to choose between killing and lying, the prohibition on killing takes priority over the prohibition on lying.

3. Each family of concepts is connected by its own set of inferential ties (Tappolet, p. 1793; Smith, pp. 11–12).

   According to Tappolet, the three monadic evaluative concepts are “interdependent”:

   \[(G)\] If something is good, then it is neither neutral nor bad.

   \[(N)\] If something is neutral, then it is neither good nor bad.

   \[(B)\] If something is bad, then it is neither good nor neutral.

   “Similarly,” she writes, “any of the three [main deontic] concepts can be taken to define the others.”

   If we take permissibility as basic, we define the others as follows:

   \[(O-P)\] \(\phi\)-ing is obligatory \(\iff\) not-\(\phi\)-ing is not permissible.

   \[(F-P)\] \(\phi\)-ing is forbidden \(\iff\) \(\phi\)-ing is not permissible.

   If we take obligation as basic, we define the others as follows:

   \[(P-O)\] \(\phi\)-ing is permissible \(\iff\) not-\(\phi\)-ing is not obligatory.

   \[(F-O)\] \(\phi\)-ing is forbidden \(\iff\) not-\(\phi\)-ing is obligatory.

   If we take forbiddenness as basic, we define the others as follows:

   \[(O-F)\] \(\phi\)-ing is obligatory \(\iff\) not-\(\phi\)-ing is forbidden.

   \[(P-F)\] \(\phi\)-ing is permissible \(\iff\) \(\phi\)-ing is not forbidden.

   But no similar inferential ties exist between evaluative and deontic concepts, says Tappolet.
comment #1: I am not sure what Tappolet means by ‘can be taken’. Isn’t it just the case that one of these is defined in terms of the others or it isn’t? Moreover, since we have no grounds for privileging one of the three main deontic concepts over the others, it looks like we should take all six definitions to be true, and hence allow for the possibility of definitional circles.

comment #2: Tappolet’s use of ‘similarly’ suggests that she thinks (G), (N), and (B) can be strengthened into definitions of goodness, neutrality, and badness, like so:

\[(G^*) \quad x \text{ is good } \equiv \neg \exists x \text{ is neither neutral nor bad.}\]
\[(N^*) \quad x \text{ is neutral } \equiv \neg \exists x \text{ is neither good nor bad.}\]
\[(B^*) \quad x \text{ is bad } \equiv \neg \exists x \text{ is neither good nor neutral.}\]

But these strike me as false: objects that aren’t the right sort of entity to be good, neutral, or bad are counterexamples, and they rule out the possibility of parity.

Smith proposes a different sort of conceptual tie within the evaluative concepts:

“Goodness and badness come in degrees are arranged on a scale ordered by the better and worse relations. More goodness is better than less, some goodness is better than none, no goodness and no badness is better than some badness, and less badness is better than more” (Smith, pp. 11–12).

He draws an interesting conclusion from this:

“... the fact that we can identify a part of the scale to do with goodness, and a part to do with badness, and a point in between these two parts that is neither good nor bad, suggests that the concepts of goodness and badness are prior to the concepts of better and worse. There is more information on the scale than mere information about the ordering in terms of better and worse” (Smith, p. 12).

But what really seems to be suggested is something slightly different: that MORE/LESS GOOD and MORE/LESS BAD are prior to BETTER. This leaves open the possibility that MORE/LESS GOOD is prior to GOOD and MORE/LESS BAD is prior to BAD. (We’ll return to this issue on Feb. 21.)

4. *There are a much wider variety of evaluative concepts than deontic concepts* (Tappolet, pp. 1793–94).

We distinguish *predicative* uses of ‘good’ (as in: “Pleasure is good”), *attributive* uses of ‘good’ (as in: “That’s a good knife”), and uses such as ‘good for’, ‘good to do’, ‘good at’, ‘good with’, etc., but we don’t make similar distinctions with deontic terms.

5. *Evaluative concepts are closely tied to the emotions, whereas deontic concepts are not* (Tappolet, pp. 1794–95).

But this alleged difference relies on Tappolet’s assumption that ADMIRABLE, CONTEMPTIBLE, etc. are evaluative concepts.

6. *There can be deontic dilemmas, but no evaluative dilemmas* (Tappolet, p. 1796).

A deontic dilemma would be a situation in which two incompatible options available to an agent are both required. (Note that it is controversial whether such situations exist.)

But a situation in which two incompatible options available to an agent are both equally good (and all other options are worse) is not a dilemma: it’s an easy decision (go with either best option).


Supposedly evaluative and deontic judgments have a different logical form: supposedly all deontic judgments can be transformed into a judgment of the form $O\phi$, whereas some evaluative judgments cannot be so transformed. We will turn to this exact issue next week.