You Only Get Out What You Put In: A Defence of Subjective Normativity

ELIZABETH VENTHAM

Abstract

This paper argues in favour of a desire-based account of normativity. In addition, it demonstrates that the view is particularly well-placed to answer 'bootstrapping' objections. Such objections have previously been taken to be a problem not just for desire-based accounts, but for a variety of other subjective accounts of practical normativity.

I will begin by explaining desire-based accounts of normativity, and then by explicating two different kinds of bootstrapping objection: one about normative conflicts, and one about normativity coming from the wrong kind of source. Both objections, I will show, can be answered with a clear explanation of what makes desire-based accounts of normativity so attractive: their ability to explain practical normative force. As such, this paper aims to go further than simply being a new response to a popular objection, or a new argument in support of a controversial view. It will also contribute to a better understanding of practical normativity itself, and how the nature of the normativity depends on and changes with the corresponding desire.

1. Introduction

This paper argues in favour of a desire-based account of practical normativity. In addition, it demonstrates that the view is particularly well-placed to answer 'bootstrapping' objections. Such objections have previously been taken to be a problem not just for desire-based accounts, but for a variety of other subjective accounts of practical normativity. By making this argument I also hope to reveal and clarify the main strength of desire-based accounts: their ability to explain practical normative force.

Suppose we're trying to figure out what Kes ought to do, practically speaking. Not just when we're concerned about their moral obligations, but when we want to know what they ought to do more broadly, including what they ought to do in terms of looking after themselves, in terms of their important relationships, or in terms

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of their participation in various hobbies. One way to work out what they ought to do would be to first work out what they desire, and see what actions would bring those desires about. If their deepest desire is to become an artist, then they ought to buy some pencils and look to the world for the right kind of inspiration. If they want to adopt a pet lizard, then they ought to research appropriate ways to care for one. But this approach can seem suspicious to anyone concerned about how unreliable our desires actually are. Explaining practical normativity by looking to desires will be less plausible when we look at desires that are immoral, for example, or irrational. Is it the case that Kes ought to spend money on a lizard if they won't then have enough money to feed themselves properly? Or is it the case that Kes ought to lash out at a friend if they want to hurt someone? Even if those things are really what they want? I look to defend desire-based approaches by showing these counter-examples to be less problematic than they might at first seem. Not all practical normativity is created equal, and the desire-theorist can argue that our obligations can be just as immoral or irrational as our desires.

Section 2 will begin by explaining desire-based accounts of practical normativity in more detail. Next, in Section 3, I will explain what kinds of objection I am interested in, and I will differentiate between two different kinds that have been labelled as 'bootstrapping' objections. These objections, as I will show, are about normativity appearing in some way that it should not: either in a way that supposedly contradicts itself (such as if Kes has conflicting desires), or in a way such that it seems to come from the wrong kind of source (such as if the desires are immoral, irrational, imprudent, *etc.*). The real fun then begins in Section 4, where I will give two new arguments to show that subjective accounts – both desire-based accounts and intention-based accounts of practical reasoning – can avoid these types of objections. The responses of the desire-based account, I will show, are particularly convincing, and they work in a way that illustrates some of the theory's greatest strengths. Finally, I will reject some potential objections in Section 5: firstly that my argument will lead to the existence of too many different oughts, secondly that I am confusing oughts with reasons, and thirdly that my paper is committed to proportionalism about reasons.

My defence of desire-based theories of normativity will be of relevance to anyone interested in such theories themselves, or to those interested in bootstrapping objections, of course. But it aims to go further than simply being a new response to a popular objection, or a new argument in support of a controversial view. This paper will also contribute to a better understanding of practical normativity

itself, for anyone tempted by a desire-based view. The key here for proponents of such accounts lies in the way an agent's desires supposedly *explain* what they ought to do. I will show that the normativity that comes out of an imperative is dependent on the desire that produces it, and so it makes sense to see that normativity as being criticisable in the same way as the desire.

2. Desire-based Normativity

What is it that an agent has *reason* to do, and, similarly, what is it that she *ought* to do? It is these two questions – questions of 'practical normativity' – that this paper is concerned with. Practical, because they are about reasons and 'oughts' for action, as opposed to, say, epistemic reasons. Normativity, because they look to do something more than just explain action, or even to explain motivations.[1] The questions are not just about whether I fell over because I am clumsy, or whether I will start cooking dinner because I am actually trying to avoid doing my work. Instead, questions of practical normativity are about how an agent *should* act (or should have acted). They are about *pre*scribing, as well as just *de*scribing. They give a kind of practical *oomph*, by the way they count in favour of action.[2] I have a reason to cook dinner because I am hungry (and a reason to put it off because I should finish my work instead), and I ought to have been more careful around the table because it hurts when I knock into it.

More specifically, this paper is concerned with whether there is a necessary connection between these kinds of normative obligations and the agent's desires. In this section I will begin by briefly sketching out and reminding the reader of some such theories about this connection. I will focus on explaining two in particular: a Foot-inspired understanding of what we ought to do as being a system of hypothetical imperatives, and a Williams-style internalism about reasons. This way, the target can be fresh in sight in time for turning to bootstrapping objections in Section 3. I will also take some time here to say something about what I take to be the connection between reasons and oughts.

[1] See Alvarez (2009) for discussion of these distinctions.

[2] The language here of a practical oomph is thanks to Joyce (2006 p. 63), the language of counting in favour can most notably be found described in Scanlon (2000).

The kinds of desire-based views that I am interested in go by many names, but one way to label them would be as 'subjective' theories of normativity. They look to explain the normative force in terms of features of the agent in question: her desires. The link between her desires and the actions explains why the agent – that agent – has reason to do them, or ought to do them. But such a label is not perfect. After all, there are multiple ways in which a theory could be subjective: it could be about other subjective features like her beliefs or intentions. For that reason, I prefer the more specific terminology of desire-based accounts when I mean those, and to use 'subjective accounts' to refer to the broader set of theories.

Let's look at this view of practical normativity in more detail. Take the following examples:

> If Philippa wants to become a great philosopher, she ought to get out of bed in the morning.
> If Em wants to have some hot coffee, they ought to warm the jug.
> If Brianna wants to do what is good for her community, she ought to attend the protest.

In these examples the oughts follow *because* of the agent's desires. We have a clear explanation for why it is that Philippa, for example, ought to get out of bed: she ought to do it because it might help achieve something she wants. We appeal to something about her psychology to explain the normativity, why that imperative has authoritative force for her. When we take away the desire, it's no longer the case that she ought to get out of bed, the 'ought' is unsupported.[3]

[3] This is covered in more detail in Foot (1972), where she also uses the example of the philosopher getting out of bed and someone warming the jug to make the coffee. Foot uses this paper to make the case that morality could be understood – contra Kant – as a system of hypothetical imperatives, and that it wouldn't be so bad to make use of a widely shared desire to explain why we also widely share moral oughts. She says, 'Kant would of course object that I am treating men as if, in the army of duty, they were volunteers, and this is exactly my thought. Why does Kant so object to the idea that those who are concerned about morality are joining together with like-minded people to fight against injustice and oppression, or to try to relieve suffering, and that they do so because, caring about such things, they are ready to volunteer in the cause?' (Foot, 2002a, p. 170). It's also important to note, though, that she didn't necessarily think that all practical normativity was desire-based, because she didn't believe that there was

The examples above each mention a single desire, but the oughts here can also be derived from multiple desires that we group together. For example, an agent might have a number of desires that could be categorized as 'moral desires', such as the desire to help a nearby old lady to cross the street, to make people happy, or to be kind, *etc*. These individual desires might each generate their own oughts, or sometimes they might overlap. The agent might also more commonly think about what they ought to do given the larger set of their moral desires. For that reason, I will sometimes refer to oughts as coming from a desire, but also sometimes as coming from sets of desires.

Another example of this kind of desire-based approach comes in the form of 'reasons internalism'. Williams, for example, argued that what we have reason to do will always depend on our desires, and some impressive philosophers have followed in his footsteps.[4] If I have a reason to attend the protest, then it might be because I want to feel better about myself and the world, because I want to impress my friends, or perhaps because I want to do what I can to show compassion to others, or maybe even because I want to maximise general well-being.

The alternatives to these theories are those that look to explain normativity by appealing to something objective, such as facts about what's objectively valuable. Foot, for example, sets out to show that moral imperatives could be understood as desire-based and saw that view as being opposed to the idea that they were categorical, and so apply to everyone, regardless of their desires.[5]

And reasons internalism is opposed to reasons externalism: the theory that at least some of our normative reasons for action are

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a necessary connection between our own prudential ends and the things we desire. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for reminding me of both the above postscript in a later edition of the paper, and her views on prudential reasons that she discusses in Foot (2002b)

[4] Williams (1981 and 1995) in particular, and some other key thinkers include Manne (2014), Markovits (2014) and Goldman (2009).

[5] Foot did agree that there was a way in which moral oughts were categorically normative for everyone – but only in the same way that, for example, etiquette is normative for everyone, and not in what I'd call a *practical* normative way. Some people describe this as the difference between an imperative being weakly categorical and strongly categorical (*e.g.*, Joyce, 2001). I can say that rules apply to anyone in this weak sense, but something extra is needed to say they have practical normative force for that person, that they give that person reasons or oughts.

ones that we have no matter what we desire, that we have because of features of the world outside of us, for example, such as moral facts.[6]

Although I am interested in both of these similar kinds of theory – of oughts and of reasons – for the remainder of the paper I will talk mostly about the former kind: desire-based theories of *oughts*. Although they sound less grammatically pleasant, I have made this choice because they are arguably the most susceptible to the kind of bootstrapping objection that I want to defend against (more details on why can be found in 5.2, where I further defend my choice) and so it is a priority for me to show how desire-based normativity can escape these objections in their strongest form.

Before moving on, it is worth noting that just because desire-based accounts appeal to the agent's desires, that does not mean that everyone on this picture will ultimately end up doing everything that they ought to do. After all, we by no means do everything that would best achieve the things we desire. Philippa might not get out of bed to do her work; perhaps it is a cold morning and she cannot resist the temptation to stay wrapped up and warm. And any one person will likely have a multitude of different desires at any one time; it would be impossible to move to satisfy them all. Other times we get distracted or are weak-willed. The desire-based accounts consider not just our short-term desires or those that we feel most strongly about at a given time, but our long-term and less consciously prominent desires as well.

Why should we think that practical normativity has this necessary connection to desire? There are a number of good arguments in the literature already, and I will not touch on all of them here. But one of the important attractions of these accounts is the way that the desires can explain normativity. If we think about the hypothetical imperatives, then we can see why it is that Philippa ought to get out of bed – it is because she wants to be a good philosopher. Em ought to warm the jug because of their desire for coffee, and if that desire goes away then so would the ought. Such an account minimises the amount of metaphysical mysteriousness that comes with discussion of normativity.[7] It is this feature of the desire-based accounts that

[6] Parfit (2011), McDowell (1995), Scanlon (2000), for example, are externalists about reasons.

[7] Error theorists about morality in particular like to reference this metaphysical weirdness, such as Joyce (2001), Olson (2014), Mackie (1977). See also Williams (in his 2011), where he discusses the strange nature of moral obligations.

will show us how they respond to bootstrapping objections, and it is because of this feature that my paper will shed more light on an understanding of how normativity works, for people who find such accounts persuasive. But first, to the objections themselves.

3. Bootstrapping Objections

In this section I will explain bootstrapping objections as they apply to a number of approaches to instrumental normativity, including those that are desire-based but also those that are intention based. I will begin by describing the objections generally, and I will then distinguish two different kinds of problem that can come under the bootstrapping umbrella.

Generally, then, bootstrapping objections are about normativity, and affect a variety of normative theories.[8] Kiesewetter, for example, discusses them primarily in relation to theories of what it means to be rational: whether being rational means doing what you believe you ought to do, doing what you think is a means to achieving something else you intend to do, believing things you have sufficient evidence for, believing the logical conclusions of other things you believe, *etc*.[9]

Bootstrapping objections potentially affect any subjective theories of what we ought to do or what we have reason to do. I will say more about these theories as I explain the objections individually below.

3.1 Bootstrapping Objection 1: Conflicting Normativity

Let's return to Philippa. She ought to get out of bed and do some work. Her desire to become a great philosopher is one of the things she wants the most. But she still also has the desire to stay in bed –

[8] The objections are discussed by a number of people, including (Kiesewetter, 2017), by (Finlay, 2014 pp. 50–61), (Piller, 2013), (Holton, 2004), (Kolodny, 2005), (Cheng-Guadarjo, 2014), and originally in (Bratman, 1981).

[9] This list is given by Kiesewetter in (Kiesewetter, 2017 pp. 14–15). He says that not conforming to these could be different ways to understand irrationality, and he describes (in order) failure to follow these as Akratic irrationality, Instrumental irrationality, Doxastic akratic irrationality, and Modus ponens irrationality. His discussion of bootstrapping objections is on pp. 81–102.

it is a cold morning and her bed is warm. Her desire to stay in bed means (according to a simplistic version of our desire-based theory of practical normativity)[10] that she also ought to stay in bed. Here we have our apparently conflicting conclusions:

> (If Philippa wants to do some work), then Philippa ought to get out of bed.
> (If Philippa wants to stay in bed), then Philippa ought not to get out of bed.

Both of those conditions are true, so Philippa both ought to get out of bed and ought not get out of bed.[11]

3.2 Bootstrapping Objection 2: Normativity from the Wrong Kind of Source

The second version of the bootstrapping objection is that oughts can be generated by mental states that should not be able to generate them. This is the kind of objection that Holton seems to refer to when he says:

> Forming an intention to do something surely cannot give one a reason to do it that one would not otherwise have. If it did, we could give ourselves a reason to do something just by intending to do it; and that cannot be right. (Holton, 2004, p. 513)

And Matthew Smith refers to this version of the bootstrapping argument as the 'wizardry argument' (Smith, 2016, p. 2261), since it is concerned with generating normativity out of thin air. As if by magic!

Some philosophers like Holton (and Kiesewetter) are worried about intentions, rather than desires. But as with the previous objection there are several different states that might give rise to this kind

[10] Not all desire-based accounts of practical normativity might want to agree. For some, desire might be a necessary condition for normativity but not a sufficient one, and there might be ways to explain how only certain desires will actually give rise to any normativity after all. But I think that even this simple connection – one in which all desires are sufficient for *some* form of normativity – is worth defending, and so I shall do so here.

[11] Kiesewetter gives a similar example about whether an agent ought to watch the football with their friends instead of doing work, in Kiesewetter (2017, p. 82). I also take this kind of objection to be what Broome (2013, p. 19) refers to when he talks about 'deontic conflict'.

of worry. Not just intentions (which can be formed as a result of a weak will), but beliefs (which can be incorrect or unjustified), and – most importantly for this paper – desires (which can be akratic, unfounded, or otherwise criticisable).[12] This indicates the kinds of theory that this objection targets: any theory of normativity that relies on any of these kinds of non-factive mental state can lead to bootstrapping objections.

We can also see this version of the bootstrapping problem in Philippa's case above: the desires that she recognises as less important, as manifestations of her weak will, are still generating oughts.

Furthermore, this objection can also come in the form of what I call 'moral bootstrapping'. This particular problem occurs when we have desires which make it the case that we ought to do immoral things. Let us look at some examples:

> If Beadie wants to cause harm, she ought to kick the puppy.
> If River wants to steal some cake, they ought to steal a cake from their officemate.
> If Cedric wants to impress his sexist friends, he ought to tell a sexist joke.

Such an immoral desire should not – according to the objection – make it the case that agents ought to do the immoral things: kick the puppy, steal the cake, and tell the joke. But a desire-based account of practical normativity does not give us an easy way to distinguish between the kinds of desires we would want to give rise to oughts and the kinds that we do not.[13]

Objective theories of normativity can escape bootstrapping objections because they do not need to rely on possibly flawed aspects of human psychology, such as our problematic desires. So they do not need to worry about normativity coming from those sources, or from those sources causing the normativity to conflict.

[12] Heathwood (2006) gives a list of such 'defective desires' including what he calls 'base desires', 'irrational desires', 'poorly cultivated desires' 'desires to be badly off', *etc.*

[13] Cheng-Guajardo seems to worry about this kind of bootstrapping problem in particular when he says 'It cannot be true in general that a person ought to do whatever will bring about her end. People sometimes adopt terrible ends' assuming that by 'terrible' he means morally so, (in his 2014, p. 489) and Smith (2016, p. 2252) refers to it as 'the argument from evil intentions'.

Before moving on, I'll briefly say something about how these two objections relate to one another. What makes the 'conflicting normativity' objection and the 'normativity from the wrong kind of source' objection both instances of bootstrapping? The main similarity is that they're both instances of the 'force' of normativity supposedly arising in ways that it can't. When a person pulls on their shoelaces, they don't generate the right kind of force to pull themselves up, only to pull up their shoelaces. The kind of force they apply isn't the appropriate kind for if they wanted their whole bodies to move upwards into the air. So too, as the objection goes, with these oughts. They supposedly aren't generating the right kind of normative force in the right kind of way.

4. The Solution

In this section I will show that the subjective theories of practical rationality that are being criticised can respond to bootstrapping objections.[14] This is because the objections fail to appreciate how the variable nature of the subjective mental states can roll over into the kind of normativity they generate.

I will also argue that the response on behalf of the desire-based view is particularly strong. In short, it is because of the work the desires do to explain the normative force, the practical oomph. There might be something an agent ought to do in virtue of their moral desires, for example, whatever those might be. There might be other things they ought to do in virtue of their prudential desires, and even more things they ought to do in virtue of their more criticisable desires, like the desire to stay in bed on a cold morning. And the different desires will provide different normative force.

At the end of Section 3, I described the unifying feature of the two objections by making use of the bootstrapping metaphor. After all, the force I exert on my shoelaces cannot outweigh the force keeping me down on the ground when I'm also the person exerting it. But one way to look at what's going on is that the objector – the person who thinks pulling on the straps will lift a person up – is expecting the wrong sort of thing from that force. There is still a force being

[14] The most notable other attempt to solve bootstrapping objections comes from Broome (1999, 2007) who aims to do so by differentiating 'narrow-scope' and 'wide-scope' approaches to oughts. Kiesewetter rejects such an approach in his (2017).

exerted on the bootstraps, that works just like other forces do. It's just that the objector has misunderstood how the force works.

A similar thing, I will argue, is going on in the case of normativity. The oughts in the examples still exert a normative force, but the objections misunderstand how much force is being generated and what kind it is and so expect too much from certain sources. I'll explain this response more clearly by showing how it applies to each objection below.

4.1 Solution to Objection 1

Firstly, I'll explain how this approach gives the desire-theorist a response to Objection 1, by showing us that it is plausible to think of agents having oughts that pull them in different directions, to both do a thing and to not do the thing. This is because they are different oughts, which are relativized to either a particular desire or a particular set of desires. They could be described as such:

> (If Philippa wants to do some work), then Philippa ought(A) to get out of bed.
> (If Philippa wants to stay in bed), then Philippa ought(B) not to get out of bed.

Here, ought(A) and ought(B) have different desires at their source, and so are different oughts.

This solves the confliction worry because there is nothing more unusual about being pulled in different directions by two different oughts than there is to say that agents have conflicting desires to begin with, because we understand the way in which the different oughts are limited. And given the broad understanding of desire that we began with it would be almost impossible *not* to have desires that conflict to some extent.

Philippa both wants to stay in bed, and wants things that can only be achieved by getting out of bed. It might be true, given the first desire, that she ought to stay in bed, but it is also true given a certain set of her standing desires that she ought to get out of bed. No conflict here.

Having oughts relativized to different sets of desires isn't so counter to our everyday understanding of them. We might tell someone that legally speaking they ought to do one thing, but morally speaking they ought to do another. Or that someone ought to fulfil a promise when it comes to thinking about their friend, but that

they ought to break the promise in order to do what's best for themselves. Sometimes I play turn-based board games online, taking turns slowly over a number of days. If I have twenty different games underway at once, there are at least twenty different moves I ought to be making in order to (fulfil my desire to) win the different games. There are also things I ought to do to make a good dinner, to enjoy my evening, to relax, *etc*.

One mistake being made by the objectors here might be to think that everything we ought to do is something we ultimately *all-things-considered* ought to do.[15] That each of these oughts are telling us the one, single, important thing that we ought to be doing in light of all of the relevant considerations. But the oughts here are not trying to be all-things-considered oughts. They are just what one ought to do given a certain, limited picture.[16] Philippa ought(B) to stay in bed, given her desire to stay in bed. And if it were the case that the desire (or set of desires) in question were the only ones she had, then it would be the case that, all-things-considered, she ought to stay in bed. The reality is much more complicated, given the sheer number of desires that any person will have.

Such an account of oughts would not prevent the agent from acting. Some oughts will be normatively stronger than others, and there are a number of ways that proponents of desire-based normativity could spell this out. They might, for example, tell a story about how some desires will result in stronger normativity because they are stronger desires, or because they are more internally consistent, or that they align better with some greater cause. Most likely the fact that Philippa ought to get out of bed will be normatively weightier than the fact she ought to stay in bed. After all, when all things are considered, her desire to be a respectable philosopher is more important to her than her desire to stay in bed. The way the normativity is grounded in the desire is a strength of the view – not something that makes it susceptible to the bootstrapping objection.

[15] Such an idea of an 'all-things-considered ought', or an 'overall ought', one that is not limited to being about certain sets of desires, for example, is rejected for other reasons in Baker (2018) and Ventham (2020). My account here still leaves room for these kinds of oughts, as long as they are understood as taking into account large (or 'overall') sets of desires. It might be the case that Philippa all-things-considered ought to get out of bed because the desire to do some work is Philippa's strongest (or otherwise most important) desire, for example.

[16] Copp (2005, p. 202 in particular) makes a similar point, showing that we shouldn't mistake limited oughts for either overall or moral oughts.

What about the second framing of the problem, where the objector's worry was more explicitly about having any kind of normative ought contradict what an agent overall ought to do? Again, I want to argue that this is unproblematic. Suppose we continue with the comparison with physical forces. Many different forces can be exerted on an object at once. I'm pulled down by gravity from the Earth and pulled up a very small amount by the gravity of the other celestial bodies above me. My hat is also very slightly pushing me down, and a slight breeze from the window is pushing me to the left, and my feet are propelling me forward. Overall, I might only be moving in one direction: forward, across the room, where I'm walking. We can talk about how the different forces combined together and the force propelling me forwards *won out*. This doesn't mean that the other forces aren't still there, even though some of them pull in the opposite direction to the one I'm moving in. Something similar is happening with normativity. There are still oughts that apply to an agent even when, overall, they ought to do something incompatible with them.

Finally, I would like to say something briefly to explain the different phenomenology agents can experience when they have normative conflicts. Sometimes, when we really want to do something that we feel like we shouldn't (in some other sense) do, it can really feel like our desires are in conflict with some external forces, such as morality, the law, or something else about what's best overall. It's important that desire-based theories of normativity can account for that experience. But this is exactly the kind of thing that the theory is *well-placed* to explain. It makes sense that different kinds of normativity that issue from the different sets of desires will also *feel different*. And sometimes, when the source of the normativity is our desire to do what's best *overall*, or best morally speaking, etc, then it makes sense why that might feel like it has a certain kind of external pull on us. And in some cases, why it might feel alienating.

So in the case of the first kind of bootstrapping objection, we have a clear response available to the subjective theories of practical rationality. I will now develop a similar response to the second version of the objection, where I will also show that desire-based views have a *particularly* good case to make, in virtue of their role in explaining normativity.

4.2 Solution to Objection 2

The second bootstrapping problem is also alleviated. This is because the oughts that come from different mental states (such as desires or intentions) have no more authority than those mental states gave them, or that we confer on them based on the mental states in question. Sometimes, in the cases of our strongest or more important desires, for example, this would be a lot of authority, and sometimes, in the case of whims and fleeting inclinations, it would be much less. In this section I'll go over this response, and show a variety of ways in which desires can still be thought to have different levels of (*e.g.*,) social, moral, or personal importance. To see this in action, let us return to one of the examples:

(If Philippa wants to do some work), then Philippa ought(A) to get out of bed.
(If Philippa wants to stay in bed), then Philippa ought(B) not to get out of bed.

Ought(B) is the more problematic of the two; it arises as a result of a desire that the agent would, overall, rather not listen to. The desire is fleeting, even if it feels particularly strong to the agent at the time. But because of the flaws in the agent's desire here, the ought that it generates is just as weak, and comes with just the same problems. The normativity should be given no more importance, no more authority, than the desire itself. Sure, the desire-based account tells me, Philippa ought to stay in bed given a certain set of her desires. But she does not hold very much stock in those particular desires, and the authority that the normativity comes with is correspondingly weak. Philippa's desire to be a respectable philosopher, on the other hand, is one that she holds with a much higher regard, and so the ought that it generates will be normatively stronger. Just as the desire itself comes with more normative oomph, so it makes sense that the oughts that it generates will be the same.

Similarly, when an agent has immoral desires, we should not expect the oughts that follow to be moral ones. When we understand them this way, it does not seem to be such a problem that these sources give rise to oughts – they are not gaining any extra authority beyond what comes with the desire already. Let us look back at a couple of moral cases:

(If Brianna wants to help her community), then she ought(C) to attend the protest.

(If Beadie wants to hurt others), then she ought(D) to kick the puppies.

We need not pretend that both (C) and (D) generate the same kind of normativity, just because they are both oughts.[17] They are very unlike each other, and this is exactly what we should expect from two such starkly different sets of desires.

The first desire is the kind that might qualify as a moral desire. What exactly a moral desire is, of course, is likely to depend on other facts about morality. They might turn out to be those desires which will lead to the agent flourishing, to the agent helping others to flourish, or to the agent respecting the rights of others, for example. Whichever view of moral desires turns to be right doesn't matter for the desire-based view of normativity – as long as there's nothing circular in the explanation of what makes them moral desires.

Beadie's desire, on the other hand, is an immoral one. The basic normative structure is the same, but we should still expect the normativity that comes out of it to be very different to that which comes out of Brianna's desire. Again, there are a range of possible explanations for what might make desires important that don't necessarily boil down to them just *being the desires agents ought to have*. We can evaluate desires based on whether they're compatible with an objective moral code, on social norms, or against other sets of external rules. Even thinking only in subjective terms, the agent can assess a desire in terms of how strongly they feel it, how often it recurs, how compatible it is with their other desires, the extent to which they identify with it, *etc*. The desire-account doesn't absolve normativity of this kind of criticism, it just means that the oughts and reasons that come out of it are also liable to be assessed in the same way. Immoral desires will generate immoral oughts, irrational desires will generate irrational ones, *etc*.

Why should anyone think there are immoral oughts at all? Again, this should only seem counter-intuitive when we're mistaking the 'oughts' in question as being oughts of a certain kind of normativity. Immoral desires don't generate moral oughts, and (depending on how you understand 'overall' normativity) they might not generate overall oughts either. But that's not to say they don't generate *some* form of ought.

[17] A notable exception here will be for those who think that all practical normativity is moral normativity. Although this is a well-regarded and persuasive view to many, I won't have time to discuss that in this paper.

Take the example of Beadie's desire to hurt others. We might criticise this desire in a number of ways. We might say that it goes against objective moral rules, or that it is harmful to society. We might also say it's harmful to Beadie herself, and conflicts with other things she values (recognition as a good person, self-respect, a less cruel world, *etc.*). When these criticisms appeal to something subjective like her other desires, then we can point to these other things she ought to bring about and persuade her that, overall, she ought not kick puppies, regardless of what she ought to do in order to fulfil that particular desire. When the criticisms appeal to something objective, like a social or moral norm, then we might not have a good way to *reason* with her, but we still have our own standards by which to denounce those oughts.[18] In this latter case we're not criticising the fact that the desires lead to normativity, just the normativity itself.

One more possibility that I'd like to address is when seemingly moral desires might give rise to non-moral actions. Think, for example, about a parent who wants the best for their child.[19] It's likely to be the case that some decidedly *immoral* actions would follow from this desire, such as actions that put the welfare of one's own child ahead of many other people's. In these cases, the criticism wouldn't be about the immorality of that desire in particular. Instead, it might be that we criticise a lack of *other* moral desires, or the way the agent's desires are balanced – such as the desire for equality or general well-being of others.

There might be other objections against the desire-based account of normativity, and I will not have time to provide a full defence of such a view in this paper. But what I have aimed to do is to demonstrate that for two kinds of bootstrapping objection, the desire account has good responses. Doing so, I hope, has emphasised some of the most appealing features of the account: its ability to provide a clear explanation for normativity, its structure, and its different guises.

Although I have given a response on behalf of subjective accounts, I said above that this response to the second bootstrapping objection also teaches us something about why a desire-based view of practical reasoning in particular is so appealing. This is because of the key role that desire plays in explaining normativity. As I discussed in Section

[18] This is similar to a point Manne makes in defence of reasons internalism. To see the defence in more detail, see Manne (2014, p. 91 & p. 103 in particular).

[19] Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

1, the desire-based accounts of normativity are appealing to many because of the way that the desire explains why the ought applies to that agent. Em's desire for hot coffee explains *why* she ought to warm the jug, and if the desire goes away then the ought goes away too.

This strength of desire-based accounts shines through when we look at how they respond to bootstrapping objections. This explanatory role that desires play shows us how the normative force can be so variable, depending on the desire that gives rise to it. So although this response to bootstrapping objections works for a number of mental states, it is particularly convincing when we think of desire, and as an apt tool of defence for those who believe in desire-based theories of normativity (at least in part) because of its explanatory power.

5. Problems and Responses

I have now shown the basic outline for how a subjective (and particularly a desire-based) understanding of normativity can respond to bootstrapping objections. In this section I will go into more detail on the picture, by responding to a number of possible problems that my response might face. For each objection I will explain why my opponent might be tempted to believe it, and then why they should not.

5.1 Too Many Oughts

One potential objection to this desire-based account of oughts is that it means we have too many different oughts.[20] After all, in my responses to the bootstrapping objection I talked about a different

[20] This objection sounds similar to one that Mark Schroeder describes as the 'Too Many Reasons' problem, in Schroeder (2004). According to this problem, desire-based accounts of normativity would simply give us an implausible number of reasons – ones for any action that might contribute to bringing about anything we desire. Schroeder responds to this problem by giving a good account of why this is not such an implausible description of our reasons, and ultimately biting the bullet. Hubin (1999), too, gives a response to this kind of objection, where he argues that many of the supposed counter-examples are mistaken in understanding the specificity of our desires.

ought for each desire or set of desires. But my opponents might worry that this is not a plausible way to understand oughts at all. It does not seem like there are lots of different things going on when an agent considers what to do in light of their various desires. Rather, agents seem to be subject to one kind of normative phenomenon, and they try their best to work out where it is ultimately pointing.

The reason that this is not a problem for the desire-account is that although the oughts are different in one respect (in that they are each related to a different desire or set of desires), they are still the same kind of thing, that is, an ought that is related to a desire. The oughts themselves will have differences depending on the desires in question: some will be more socially, morally, or subjectively important, for example, and others will be less so. Some oughts we'll value more, others we'll value less. But they all share the same basic structure, and they are all still oughts. Although there are differences between them, it shouldn't necessarily feel like they're completely different normative phenomena.

One particular token of this worry comes from Kiesewetter when he discusses 'subjective oughts'. He says,

> The subjective 'ought' strategy thus misses the point. […] What we want to know is whether we ought to be rational in the sense of 'ought' that matters for deliberation. (Kiesewetter, 2017, p. 118)

This is not quite the same as the worry that there are too many oughts, but rather that one of the oughts is not doing the right kind of thing; it is not performing the same function that is necessary, that the others perform. Perhaps Kiesewetter's worry here is that subjective oughts do not seem to be the same kind of thing as oughts that matter for *deliberation*. We might think here of some of the weaker kind in particular: the fact that Philippa ought to stay in bed because she wants to, or the fact that Beadie ought to kick puppies because she wants to.

But these are all still the kinds of oughts that do matter for deliberation, just as in the metaphor with the forces all of the different forces will be acting on the object even when it only moves in one direction. After all, the things we deliberate between are directions in which our different desires pull us. This is still the case when a desire pulls us *but not very much*, or a desire is very easily overruled, or immoral, or something we (upon reflection) would want to reject. And that is not a problem for the account, that these weaker oughts are still what Kiesewetter calls 'deliberative oughts'. After all, not all desires will give rise to motivation in proportion to their strength

or importance, not unless the strength of a desire is the amount that it motivates you, so it will not be the case that the only things agents ought to do are the things they end up doing.

5.2 Reasons and Oughts

The second objection that I want to defend against is the worry that my account is an account of reasons, but not of oughts. As I mentioned at the beginning, this paper defends a desire-based account of practical normativity, and this includes both what agents have reason to do and what they ought to do. But some of my opponents might think I have only justified the former, and not the latter, because the former is normatively weaker.[21] An agent having a reason to perform an action doesn't seem as strong as if they *ought* to do it.

But I want to deny that this is the case. Once again, I do not think that everything we ought to do is something that we overall, all-things-considered, ought to do. And to say so is not to confuse oughts with reasons. Firstly, because this still tracks the way that we talk about what we ought to do. It is perfectly common to talk about what we ought to do in one sense while thinking about the way that this competes with other things that we ought to do. I can think about the fact that I really ought to keep a promise to Sophie (given that I desire to keep my promises, particularly to her!), but that in another sense I really ought to break it, because of stronger competing desires, and a stronger competitor for something I ought to do. I take it that such thoughts are not *just* the product of my spending too much time with other philosophers.

Secondly, I concede that we often talk about what we ought to do and mean what we *overall* ought to do. But this does not mean that any ought is an overall ought. It just means that when we use our language we often use a broader term as a shorthand for a more specific term. This should be evident enough from our ordinary talk of 'reasons' – just because our everyday talk tends to be about just 'reasons' generally, that does not mean that there are not a range of different specific phenomena that we pick up with that talk, such as epistemic reasons, normative reasons, motivating reasons, *etc.*

Thirdly, the variety of oughts that I discuss are similar enough, structurally, to phenomena that do seem to be oughts, that it makes

[21] See, for example, Kiesewetter (2017 pp. 112–115).

sense to understand them as different types of the same phenomenon. I mentioned this briefly in response to the 'too many oughts' worry above, but it's relevant here, too. Take one of the least controversial examples of an ought that I've argued for: the fact that Brianna (if she wants to help her community) ought to attend the protest. According to the views I've been defending, this ought applies to her because of her desire to help her community, and if that desire is taken away then the ought would only still apply to her if the action would fulfil other desires that she has, such as the desire to promote equality or for the improved well-being of her friends who are members of oppressed groups. Without any desires, it would be left unsupported. It'll be a subjectively strong ought if Brianna cares a lot about her community, and endorses this about herself, because she *likes* being the kind of person who has these desires, and so the kind of person who ends up going to protests. There will also be plenty of other senses in which this ought is objectively important – it's the kind of moral ought (and the kinds of moral desires) that society generally values, and ones that likely match up to an external moral standard.

Structurally, this ought seems to match the myriad of other oughts that my account argues for. Beadie ought to (given her desire to hurt others) kick the puppies, and that 'ought' would be left unsupported if that desire of hers went away. Although I've argued that there are a variety of ways in which this ought is likely to have different importance or strength to it, those features are explained in the same way as they're explained in the case of Brianna's ought. Where Brianna's desire and ought matched an external moral and social standard, Beadie's contravene it. And perhaps, if we're lucky, Beadie's desires also might be *subjectively* weaker. None of the differences between these two types of ought seem to be differences in their structure.

Fourthly, I'll say something about what the difference between oughts and reasons still is, on this account. I have argued that there are a lot of oughts – oughts that can match any desire or set of desires that an agent has. But there's still a sense in which an ought is *the* thing to do, even though it's the thing to do relativized to one of those desire sets. We can suppose for each of these desire sets, there's one thing that will best fulfil them, and that's the thing that they ought to do. But there will still be even more things that they have *reason* to do. Brianna desires to help her community, and so she ought to attend the protest, because we can suppose that is the thing she can do to best help her community at the moment. But that desire also gives her plenty of (outweighed) reasons to do other things: to

pick up litter, to organise a film screening, to cover up an ugly wall with some beautiful graffiti. There are plenty of reasons that each desire favours, but perhaps only one thing that a desire means we *ought* to do.

Finally, if the above has not convinced my opponent, then I will happily concede that, as far as those opponents are concerned, this paper is about reasons rather than about oughts. It is just a matter of terminology, after all, and sometimes different terminology is bound to be part of an explanation between apparent disagreement in philosophical accounts. I have been using 'ought' to mean a similar normative phenomenon as a reason. An ought being a conclusion of a set of reasons, a conclusion given certain limitations (certain desires or sets of desires).[22] But if others do not want to use the terms that way then they do not have to.

Before I move on I will briefly give some time to a similar worry. What if my opponent is not just worried about the terminology of oughts when some of them have different strengths of normativity to others, but they are worried about whether there is normativity *at all* with these oughts. Might it be the case that normativity is about what we overall, all-things-considered, ought to do? And that a reason to do anything else is not really a normative reason?

But I am confident that there is something meaningful, real, and shared between all the kinds of normative oughts and reasons that agents have under this account, and that such a thing is normativity. The connection with the agent's desires gives these oughts and reasons exactly the kind of oomph that philosophers seem to mean when they try to explain what exactly normativity is. It explains *why* a reason or an ought counts in favour of an action. It does not necessarily correspond with what the agent actually does, but there is an important way in which it corresponds with what an agent might do, something that might factor into their deliberation, that might lead to motivation.

I find it helpful to think of Manne's work in favour of reasons internalism when I think about what normativity is. She asks us to think about a number of ways in which we interact with each other:

> …think about the ways we instruct, reproach, request, cajole, wheedle, manipulate, demand, condemn, yell, and even stamp our feet on the ground in disgust at people's conduct. Think, in other words, about the whole teeming mess of embodied and

[22] I mean this to include oughts which have their 'limitations' set to include everything relevant – what you might call 'overall' oughts.

> socially-situated normative behavior—*i.e.*, behavior by means of which we give voice to ideas about what to do, and also what should happen. (Manne, 2014, p. 94)

Each of these behaviours stands a chance of success by either appealing to (or occasionally by trying to create) desires in the person we are interacting with. In contrast to these kinds of behaviours, when we act in ways that do not even *try* to appeal to anything related to a person's desires (perhaps by restraining them, or casting them out) then we seem to be engaging with them in a different and non-normative way. The difference between the ways we interact when appealing to internal reasons (those related to the agents' desires) and external ones (reasons without that necessary connection) says a lot to me about what normativity is. And it is definitely the kind of thing that can still exist at a variety of levels of strength, regardless of judgments about what an agent *overall ought* to do.

5.3. Proportionalism

The final worry that I will address is that the desire-account's response to bootstrapping objections means we need to accept a kind of proportionalism. I will begin, of course, by explaining what this actually is.

Proportionalism in this sense is the view that the strength of an agent's reasons correspond to the strength of their desires. If I have a strong reason to attend the protest, for example, then this is because I have a strong desire that would be fulfilled by that attendance. And it goes the other way too: if I have a strong desire to drink the coffee, then this will give me a strong reason to warm up the jug.[23]

I find proportionalism to be very persuasive – particularly given what I have described as a main strength of desire-based views: the fact that the desire explains the practical normativity, explains how it works and why it has its force. Proportionalism would mean that the desires are able to explain even more of the normativity, to reduce any metaphysical weirdness even further.

But the account of desire-based normativity that I have defended does not *commit me* to proportionalism – one could take what is

[23] Proportionalism is described well by Schroeder (2004). Schroeder also defends a desire-based account of normativity similar to the one defended here, but he rejects proportionalism.

appealing about the way the desire-based views respond to bootstrapping objections without taking the proportionalism as well.

What is important for desire-based views of practical normativity is that there must be some desire present in the agent for the normativity to get off the ground at all. And that there is then some correspondence between that desire and that normativity, that the weak-willed or immoral desires do very different normative jobs to, for example, Brianna's desire to improve society. But the way that those desires affect the differences in normativity does not have to be through an explanation of the strength of the desire.

One example that might appeal to people distrustful of proportionalism is through some kind of explanation of the objective nature of those desires. Suppose, for example, we determined what kinds of desires counted as 'moral' desires. It might be an agent's desire to help her fellow person, her desire to maximise their well-being, or her desire to exemplify particular virtues.[24] Whichever those are, perhaps, it might be the case that their normativity is more important than others. Certainly in the eyes of the moral law. Such a person would have a kind of hybrid view: one that needs a desire to get the normativity off the ground, but that explains the differences in the resulting normativity in terms of objective facts about those desires.

It is possible to think there is something more to the source of normativity than our desires, something extra that adds to the normative force. Even for that view, the desire-account still has an answer.

6. Conclusion

This paper defended subjective (and particularly desire-based) accounts of normativity. It did so by explaining how such accounts can respond to bootstrapping objections. Although I gave a new response on behalf of subjective accounts generally, including those that are concerned with intentions, I argued that the desire-based accounts respond particularly well because of the way that the desires explain that normativity. Where some of our desires are stronger or more important than others, the resulting normativity is stronger or more important too. Understanding this is an important step in understanding normativity and our moral psychology.[25]

[24] For more on such an account, see *e.g.*, Arpaly and Schroeder (2013).

[25] Some form of the ideas in this paper came to me during my PhD studies. The list of people who've helped me with them has grown impressively

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*Elizabeth Ventham (*Elizabeth.ventham@plus.ac.at*) is a Postdoc at The University of Salzburg in Austria. Other recent publications on this topic include 'Morality Without Categoricity' (*European Journal of Analytic Philosophy*) and 'The Division of Normativity and a Defence of Demanding Moral Theories' (*Ethical Theory and Moral Practice).