

(Some) Attitudes that Matter

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Although there is significant disagreement about how and in what sense reasons are normative, most philosophers agree that (practical) reasons are paradigmatic cases of normativity.¹ The debate over normative reasons among internalists and externalists (as well as subjectivists and objectivists) notwithstanding, the aim of all of these arguments is to determine the sense in which reasons, regardless of what grounds them, are normative.² A similar set of issues arises when considering whether the requirements of rationality are normative.³

It surely seems correct to think that the *central* questions about normativity should focus on reasons and rationality. Notice, however, that the basic idea that ‘normativity’ is intended to capture is how reasons and the requirements of rationality exert normative pressure on us *qua* suitably rational agents.⁴ Given that this is one of the aims of these accounts, we can reasonably ask whether there are other sources of normativity, to borrow a phrase from Korsgaard (1996), that exert comparable normative pressure on us. Unlike Korsgaard, who focuses on the features

¹ For the sake of simplicity, I set aside the question of the sense in which reasons for belief are normative.

² Parfit (2011, vol. 2: 275) makes this point rather forcefully, although he uses it to show that reasons internalists who link reasons’ normativity with their capacity to motivate are missing this central point and thus are not presenting tenable views of reasons. I do not think that we need to grant this latter claim to recognize that these views agree on the basic question at issue as described above.

³ On this issue, see, for example, Broome (2004; 2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2013), Kolodny (2005; 2007), Brunero (2008), Kiesewetter (2017), and Wedgewood (2017). Whether rational requirements are normative is a central concern for philosophers working on rationality, regardless of their disagreement concerning these requirements’ wide or narrow scope.

⁴ This is not true of all accounts of normativity, given that some views are interested in what makes a reason a genuine reason. This is an ontological question about reasons that does not bear directly on the question of whether and how reasons or the requirements of rationality are taken up by rational agents. Notice, however, that many of these accounts nonetheless take there to be pressure to explain the sense in which they can be adopted by rational agents, most commonly (although not exclusively) by explaining how they can motivate us (for a contrary view, see Markovits 2014).

constitutive of agency, I propose that we focus on two attitudes that I will argue are distinctive of *our relationship to our capacity for agency*. These attitudes are commitments and endorsements, given that these attitudes are typically considered to capture, in Frankfurt's (1998) parlance, the importance of what we care about.

On face value, it may seem uncontroversial to claim that commitments and endorsements are, *some of the time and in some sense*, normative. This seems straightforward in the case of commitments. Imagine, as part of my New Year's resolution, I made a commitment to donate a percentage of my monthly income to Oxfam. Come July, I can remind myself of this commitment when I wonder whether to continue making my donations. In doing so, I appear to be doing two things: first, reminding myself of the reasons in light of which I made the commitment; second, registering that the fact that I made a *commitment* in light of these reasons is *normatively significant* in a way not fully captured by the reasons in favor of forming (or continuing to hold) the commitment. Although there are important differences between commitments and endorsements, we can understand the latter as presenting similarly *prima facie* normative features.

With this description in mind, it would be natural to assume that commitments and endorsements share a distant family resemblance with reasons, or perhaps more accurately, they share *some* of the characteristics that make reasons normative. So how similar to traditional normative concepts are commitments and endorsements? While remaining neutral about question of what grounds reasons' normativity, we can agree that traditional normative concepts such as reasons exert their normativity by virtue of their relationship to whatever it turns out grounds them (possibilities here include facts, attitudes, desires or dispositions). As I noted earlier, even reasons internalists and subjectivists about reasons will agree that when reasons' normativity is grounded

in, say, agents' (fully-informed, ideally rational) desires, the normativity that they end up having as a result *belongs to the reasons themselves* and not to the attitude in which they are grounded.

But if commitments and endorsements have any normative force, it is not, I will argue, as a result of what they are. If commitments and endorsements were inherently normative, then this would mean that simply by committing myself to, say, being a jerk or endorsing some course of action for no reason whatsoever, I transform a normatively neutral activity into one that I ought to pursue. Notice that the worry here is *not* that if commitments and endorsements were normative in nature, then we would be forced to grant that we ought to pursue unacceptable, ridiculous or morally impermissible courses of action just because there are no constraints on to what we can commit ourselves or what we can endorse. It is rather that, were commitments or endorsements to be inherently normative, we would not be able to explain *from where* their normativity would arise. The cases where we commit ourselves to or endorse unacceptable, ridiculous or morally impermissible courses of action simply highlight this explanatory gap.

In light of this problem, I will argue that neither commitments or endorsements are themselves normative. Instead, if they have any normative force at all, it is in virtue of the reasons that underwrite them. Or so I will argue. To do so, I undertake three aims in this paper: (1) to sketch working definitions of commitments and endorsements; (2) to show why, contrary to our intuitions and some influential accounts of their rational force (e.g., Chang 2009; Frankfurt 1998a,b; Bratman 2004; Gilbert 2014; Liberman & Schroeder 2016; Shpall 2014; Wallace 2006b), these attitudes cannot be the sources of normativity even if they bear an important relationship to standard normative concepts such as reasons; (3) to determine the sense in which these attitudes matter, notwithstanding my central contention that they are not the sources of normativity. I conclude by considering how the argument I present affects, as Parfit (2011) and Scanlon (2014)

each argues, the claim that the irreducibly normative concepts that matter are (only and exclusively) reasons.

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