

# Ethics and the Question of What to Do

Abstract for The Future of Normativity conference 2018

Several debates in ethics and metaethics highlight a form of deliberative uncertainty that is difficult to express. For instance, in a choice situation where we face empirical or normative uncertainty, we may be tempted to ask: ‘I can’t figure out what I ought to do; *now* what ought I to do?’ Similarly, in a situation where we face conflicting norms—where, say, morality and prudence require us to perform different actions—we may be tempted to ask: ‘Which of these actions ought I *really* to perform?’ In this paper, I shall seek to shed light upon the uncertainty which those questions seek to communicate.

The currently leading view is that the relevant form of uncertainty concerns some special normative question, such as the question of what one ought to do, *all things considered*. That assumption has informed many recent debates about questions like decision-making under uncertainty, whether different kinds of normative reasons are comparable, and the viability of moral realism. One of my aims is to argue that the dominant view is inadequate. My main argument to that effect shows that the relevant uncertainty may remain even though all truths are known. In particular, it may remain even though all *normative* truths are known too. For that reason, uncertainty about the deliberative question cannot be uncertainty about those truths.

My second aim is to outline a combination of cognitivism about normative uncertainty and non-cognitivism about deliberative uncertainty which explains why those forms of uncertainty are distinct. On that view, normative uncertainty amounts to uncertainty about the truth of a normative proposition. By contrast, deliberative uncertainty instead amounts to uncertainty about *what to do*, which is not uncertainty about the truth of some proposition but a kind of non-cognitive uncertainty about what decision to make.<sup>1</sup> One of the upshots of the paper is thus that even if there are normative truths, the central deliberative question does not concern those truths. Instead, that question does not have a true answer.

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<sup>1</sup> The focus on the question of what to do is associated with Gibbard (2003). Unlike Gibbard, however, I shall propose that the question of what to do is distinct from the question of what I ought to do.

My point of departure is Frank Jackson's argument against objective act-consequentialism, which is based on the following case:<sup>2</sup>

**Jill & John:** Jill is a physician who has to decide on the correct treatment for her patient, John, who has a minor but not trivial skin complaint. She has three drugs to choose from: drug A, drug B, and drug C. Careful consideration of the literature has led her to the following opinions. Drug A is very likely to relieve the condition but will not completely cure it. One of drugs B and C will completely cure the skin condition; the other though will kill the patient, and there is no way that she can tell which of the two is the perfect cure and which the killer drug.<sup>3</sup>

As I explain, Jackson's argument is an instance of the worry that when we do not know how to achieve the best outcome, objective consequentialism cannot answer the question of what to do. Jackson writes that:

[The] problem arises from the fact that we are dealing with an *ethical* theory when we deal with consequentialism, a theory about *action*, about *what to do*... Now, the fact that an action has in fact the best consequences may be a matter which is obscure to an agent. (Similarly, it may be obscure to the agent what the objective chances are.) In the drugs example, Jill has some idea but not enough of an idea about which course of action would have the best results... Hence, the fact that a course of action would have the best results is not in itself a guide to action...<sup>4</sup>

However, I shall also argue that Jackson's favored 'decision-theoretic consequentialism' also fails to answer the question of what to do under certain conditions of ignorance or uncertainty. The reason is that although the implications of that view are sensitive to the agent's uncertainty about empirical matters, they are not sensitive to facts about her evaluative uncertainty. The view thus fails to answer the question of what to do for agents who are uncertain about what is objectively good. The recent debate about decision-making under evaluative uncertainty has focused on solving that problem.<sup>5</sup> A problem with those attempts, however, is that they tend to posit what Jackson calls an

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson 1991. Unless context indicates otherwise, I use 'consequentialism' to denote objective act-consequentialism, which is the view that every agent ought to perform the action that would in fact have the best consequences.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson 1991: 462–63.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson 1991: 466–67; italics in original.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of that debate, see Bykvist 2017.

‘annoying profusion of “oughts”’.<sup>6</sup> On that view, there are several different oughts corresponding to different states of information; for example, there may be an ‘objective’ ought which is sensitive to the facts, a ‘subjective’ ought which is sensitive to the agent’s beliefs, and so on. Views which posit such a multiplicity of oughts fail to answer the deliberative question of an agent who is uncertain about which ought to satisfy. Attempts to single out one of these oughts as especially relevant to action face what I call the *tie-breaking problem*.

Another possible reason to posit a multiplicity of oughts is that different sources of normativity, such as morality, prudence, and so on, may give rise to distinct requirements. Again, that view too has the result that we may be deliberatively uncertain because we do not know which ought to satisfy. However, when the question is put in terms of whether one *ought* to act morally or prudentially, it may seem to have easy, ‘self-endorsing’ answers: morally, we ought to act morally, and prudentially, we ought to act prudentially, and that is that. As I shall explain, this problem arises both in the debate about *the normative question*<sup>7</sup> and, in a slightly different way, with regard to the question of whether there are *alternative normative concepts* (§7).<sup>8</sup>

What those problems suggest is that deliberative uncertainty is not normative uncertainty. The view which I shall propose vindicates that suggestion. My final argument focuses on the conceptual possibility that the normative truths may be horrifying. If we learn that we ought to cause extreme suffering, say, we may know all the normative truths but still remain uncertain about what to do. I end by outlining my favored metaethical explanation of why that is the case.

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<sup>6</sup> (Jackson 1991, 471).

<sup>7</sup> (Korsgaard 1996).

<sup>8</sup> (Eklund 2017).