

BOOK REVIEWS

Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. ix + 302 pp.

Allan Gibbard's book *Thinking How to Live* is an important sequel to his earlier and very influential book *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. His earlier book defended a conception of morality as involving distinctive moral feelings of guilt, shame, and resentment that it is rational for someone to have and went on to defend an expressivist conception of rationality according to which judgments of rationality involve acceptance of norms for behavior and feeling. Though Gibbard offered a novel conception of the semantics and logic of normative judgment, he spent much of that book discussing the evolution, psychology, and social dynamics of normative commitment. *Thinking How to Live* has a narrower focus. Though Gibbard regards morality as one form of normativity or practical reason, he largely avoids discussion of morality, focusing instead on normativity or practical reason. Here too, his focus is narrower, restricted primarily to issues about the semantics, logic, and epistemology of normative judgment. The new book reinterprets the earlier notion of accepting a norm in terms of planning or commitment to a plan. One consequence of this reinterpretation is to make the expressivist character of Gibbard's account of normative judgment clearer. He then proceeds to explain normative judgment in terms of commitment to a set of contingency plans, which allows him to defend an account of normative inference and reasoning. In fact, Gibbard argues that his expressivist conception of normative judgment allows him to defend versions of various metaethical claims often thought to be the exclusive province of the practical realist.

I have been claiming triumph after triumph for a program of quasi-realism. Plans, and plan-laden judgments more generally, turn out in remarkable ways to mimic prosaic descriptive judgments. The predicates 'is okay to do' and 'is the thing to do' act much like ordinary, descriptive predicates, in a multitude of ways: judgments in terms of these predicates can be correct or incorrect. Standard logic applies. There is a natural property that constitutes being okay to do, and a naturalistic attribute that being okay consists in. Being okay to do can

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figure in causal explanations. We can even speak of a person's "knowing" what to do, and of epistemic (or "quasi-epistemic") virtues in planning and plan-laden judgment. (251)

The result is a metaethically ecumenical form of expressivism that endorses many of the claims associated with the ethical intuitionist tradition and, more recently, with nonreductive forms of ethical naturalism.

This ecumenicism invites various questions. If Gibbard can endorse such traditionally realist metaethical claims, in what sense is his view still expressivist? He regards his view as expressivist because of where it starts, not where it finishes (184). He thinks that he can work his way up to realist claims from resources that recognize only prosaic (nonnormative) belief and planning. Because Gibbard treats these resources as requiring nothing the expressivist cannot recognize, he thinks he can explain realist claims with expressivist resources (xii, 62–63).

But if realistic claims are defensible after all, then one might wonder why one should bother working so hard to reach them from expressivist resources. Why not just start with a realistic interpretation of normative judgment from the beginning? Then we could just apply the semantics of assertion and the logic of belief to normative judgments and wouldn't have to work so hard to find expressivist surrogates. But thoroughgoing practical realism is controversial. Perhaps Gibbard thinks that it's worth trying to show how central realist commitments can be derived even from expressivist fundamentals. Toward the end of the book, he does offer an argument against thoroughgoing practical realism. In matters of prosaic belief—for instance, about what one perceives—Gibbard believes that thoroughgoing realism is appropriate because one can provide a "deep vindication" of the reliability of our senses. For instance, we can appeal to evolutionary theory to explain how our perceptual judgments issue from sensory capacities that we have reason to believe generally, if imperfectly, track independently existing facts about the world. By contrast, Gibbard thinks, there simply is no plausible deep vindication of the reliability of our plan-making capacities in terms of tracking independent facts about which plans are best (251–58).

To understand Gibbard's expressivism and its ecumenical ambitions, it is necessary to say more about his account of normative inference and normative content. To make normative judgments is to make plans about actual or hypothetical situations. He appeals to the idealized notion of a *hyperplan*, which is a maximal contingency plan that prescribes a unique course of action and proscribes alternative courses of action for every conceivable situation. We might say someone has a *hyperbelief* if she is maximally opinionated about which situations she will find herself in. We might then describe a *hyperagent* as someone who combines a hyperbelief and a hyperplan. Of course, most of us have neither hyperplans nor hyperbeliefs. Instead we can represent our par-

tial plans and beliefs as the sets of plans and beliefs consisting of disjunctions of plans and beliefs that are not ruled out by the plans and beliefs we accept. This allows Gibbard to characterize a state of mind that mixes fact and plan as “given by the hyperstates that it allows and the ones it rules out” (57). This picture of the content of an agent’s commitments appeals to the structure provided by possible world semantics to explain how there can be entailment relations among judgments that mix fact and plan. Gibbard applies this analysis to a disjunctive syllogism. Suppose Holmes has the contingency plan to pack now if it is not too late to catch the train:

1. Either packing now is what one ought to do [plan] or it is too late to catch the train [fact].
2. Even now it is not too late to catch the train [fact].
3. Hence, packing is what one ought to do now [plan].

Holmes’s contingency plan commits him to packing in all worlds in which it is not too late for him to catch the train. Once it is established that the actual world is one in which it is not too late to catch the train, it follows that the actual world is one in which Holmes must pack. In this way, Gibbard claims that he can explain entailment relations among judgments that mix fact and plan. This, he claims, allows the expressivist to solve the so-called Frege-Geach problem about the content of normative judgments in various contexts.

But what kind of necessity can the expressivist attribute to the conclusion of this argument? The practical realist will offer a truth-theoretic explanation. It’s not possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. But the expressivist must say that Holmes’s plans commit him to the conclusion in the sense that they rule out any alternative; Holmes’s contingency plan includes this practical conclusion. That means that Holmes is committed to the practical conclusion—unless he changes his plans. But that means that the necessity of the practical conclusion is, for the expressivist, unlike the practical realist, *plan-relative*.

Indeed, plan-relativity seems to be a quite general feature of Gibbard’s expressivist reconstructions of various realist claims. But this plan-relativity strikes me as potentially problematic. For instance, it affects how well Gibbard’s expressivism deals with one aspect of the Frege-Geach problem. Frege believed that an adequate semantic theory should recognize the univocity of terms across asserted and unasserted contexts of utterance. Geach thought that Frege’s point posed problems for noncognitivist analyses of the meaning of moral judgments. The traditional noncognitivist (e.g., emotivist) construes moral assertion as the expression of the appraiser’s attitudes rather than a description of the way the world is. But then it is not clear how the noncognitivist understands the meaning of moral predicates in *unasserted* contexts, such as the antecedents of conditional statements. Consider the following conditional.

If it is wrong to murder innocent children, then it is wrong to pay someone else to murder innocent children.

This conditional judgment may express an attitude toward paying someone to murder innocent children, although this attitude would be conditional on the wrongness of murdering innocent children. It expresses no attitude toward the wrongness of murdering innocent children. A related worry arises for Gibbard's analysis, I think. Perhaps the moral predicate 'wrong' in the consequent of the conditional picks out a conditional plan. But the natural way of understanding the conditional is that that plan is conditional on something that is not itself plan-relative, namely, whether murdering innocent children is wrong. Here, and in other unasserted contexts, moral predicates appear to have a meaning that is not plan-relative. If so, I don't think Gibbard's plan-laden semantics for moral language has addressed this aspect of the Frege-Geach worry for noncognitivism.

We might also notice a worry about Gibbard's attempt to vindicate, within an expressivist framework, traditional realist claims about the way in which the normative supervenes upon and is constituted by the natural. Within any given hyperplan, there is a plan for every possible contingency. This allows us to say that the thing to do in any given situation supervenes upon a naturalistic description of the contingencies of that situation and that those contingencies are what makes the content of the contingency plan the thing to do in that situation. But this kind of plan-relativity is not built into the usual understanding of ethical naturalism. Consider the way most of us would understand how the injustice of apartheid supervened upon various laws, institutions, and practices of racial discrimination. We could also say that this naturalistic supervenience base of the injustice of apartheid constituted its injustice. In making these claims, we commit ourselves to two other claims—(a) that any social system with the same discriminatory laws, institutions, and social practices would also be unjust, and (b) that a social system could not fail to be unjust unless its laws, institutions, and social practices were different from those of the apartheid system in some relevant way. The appraiser's plans do not figure in (a) and (b) or the supervenience base of moral properties, such as injustice. But then the sort of supervenience and constitution claims that ethical naturalists and other moral realists make appear not to be plan-relative, as Gibbard's analysis implies. Perhaps these are realist claims that the expressivist should eschew. That would leave Gibbard with a consistent position, but it would require him to forgo his distinctive desire to defend a meta-ethically ecumenical version of expressivism.

Finally, I would note that there's something odd about identifying normative judgment with plans, as Gibbard does. Sometimes normative judgments do not affect one's plans, as when one makes normative judgments about other people, the past, or merely hypothetical circumstances. Gibbard represents such judgments as a form of contingency planning—planning what to do were

one ever to find oneself in such circumstances. But that interpretation seems both strained and overly narcissistic. My judgments about the permissibility of slavery in ancient Greece or the antebellum South aren't contingency plans for what it would make sense for me to do were I to find myself in similar social circumstances. Even when normative judgments do affect one's plans, as when one decides upon a course of action after reaching a normative judgment, the planning appears to be *downstream* from the judgment. Plans are often made as the result of normative judgments about what one ought to do. It's easy for the practical realist to explain how planning is consequential on normative judgment, because she treats normative judgment as a belief that can and often does affect motivations and intentions. It's harder to see how Gibbard can explain how planning is consequential on normative judgment. Indeed, Gibbard's expressivism seems to have the same difficulty here that the behaviorist about mental states has explaining how there can be mental states that don't produce behavior and how even when mental states do cause behavior the behavior is downstream from the mental state.

Given some of these worries about Gibbard's expressivism, one is inclined to wonder why one should work so hard to try to earn realist marks of objectivity from expressivist resources. Why not just embrace thoroughgoing normative realism? Gibbard's main answer to that question is to claim there is a worry about the prospects for the deep vindication of the general reliability of our moral sensibilities. Gibbard is not the first to raise this worry, and he does little to explore possible realist attempts to provide deep vindication.

One realist vindication worth discussing appeals to some of Gibbard's own ideas, in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, about the utility of systems of normative governance. There Gibbard posits selective advantage for the coordinating activity provided by normative governance, as such, independently of any assumptions about normative content. But, as Gibbard concedes in the new book, a deep vindication "is not a vindication from an Archimedean point outside of everything" (254) but must instead make defeasible assumptions about the structure and deliverances of the capacities in question. Focusing specifically on moral modes of normativity and relying on common assumptions about some basic moral demands, we might begin to sketch a possible explanation of why we are generally, if imperfectly, reliable detectors of moral properties. The basic story is familiar enough. Commonsense morality is concerned with, among other things, the appropriate terms for personal and social interaction and sometimes requires people to restrain their pursuit of their own aims and interests and accept a fair division of goods and resources. It recognizes duties of cooperation (including duties of promise keeping and fair play), forbearance, and mutual aid. Each individual has an interest in the fruits of interaction conducted according to these norms. Though it might be desirable from a self-interested point of view to reap the benefits of others' compliance with norms of forbearance and cooperation without incurring the burdens of

one's own, the opportunities to do this are infrequent. Noncompliance is generally detectable, and others won't be forbearing and cooperative toward agents who are known to be noncompliant. If so, compliance typically secures greater long-term benefits than noncompliance.

Moreover, because of the generally beneficial character of cooperative and restrained behavior, together with the cognitive and affective advantages of acting from fairly coarse-grained dispositions, people will have reason to develop and act on social sentiments and other-regarding attitudes. These attitudes will also receive external support. Because each has an interest in others' cooperation and restraint, communities will tend to reinforce compliant behavior and discourage noncompliant behavior. Community pressure, therefore, will also foster the development of fairly coarse-grained compliant dispositions.

The individual and collective benefits of regulating our interactions by norms like those of commonsense morality ensure that such norms will usually be culturally transmitted and internalized. If such a moral capacity is adaptive, it could have been selected for by evolution. It seems no accident, therefore, that people will have the moral sentiments and other-regarding attitudes prescribed by commonsense morality. If so, we have a sketch of a plausible explanation of why it is that if morality is roughly what we think it is, it is to be expected that, at least under favorable conditions (where our judgments are not subject to excessive bias or distortion), we are fairly good detectors of moral properties. This is just one sketch of what a deep vindication of practical realism might look like.

This brief discussion cannot do justice to the complexities or interest of Gibbard's important restatement and extension of his normative expressivism. Even those who are unconvinced by his expressivism should find much of interest in his discussions of individual issues about the nature of plans, the logic of normative inference, the relationship between normative concepts and properties, the prospects for nonnaturalism and naturalism in ethics, and the dynamics of normative inquiry. Gibbard's book is not easy reading; his discussion is often technical and always abstract. But there is often a kind of spare elegance to his treatment of technical issues, and the complexity of his discussion comes with the terrain. Gibbard's new defense and extension of expressivism won't be the last word on the metaethical topics it addresses. But everyone should agree that Gibbard's new book advances discussion of these issues and provides the most resourceful and thoroughgoing defense of expressivism to date.

David O. Brink

University of California, San Diego

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