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# **“A Bewildering Conceptual Jungle”: von Wright’s Analysis of the Ambiguity of the Term “Norm”**

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In contemporary philosophy, the terms “norm” and “normative” are used in numerous thematic and argumentative contexts. Both terms operate in several different meanings and have several different connotations, such as standard, measure, guide, goal, model, optimum, limit, condition. Even if the basic ideas of rule-following and correctness are implied by most usages of these terms, the types of rules and the types of correctness at issue vary greatly depending on the debate and its main topic. Further, the large coverage of the topics – from the general structures of human conduct and action to the most demanding aspects of our epistemic, aesthetic and moral lives – suggests that the variance of meanings may be too broad for theoretical and systemic purposes. This worry is expressed pertinently by Stephen Finlay in his recent essay “Defining Normativity”:

In recent jargon, *metanormative* theory explores fundamental questions crosscutting ethics, political and legal philosophy, aesthetics, epistemology, and more. It is described as the study of *normativity*, suggesting there is something, called ‘normativity’, that is the common object of the competing theories of the philosophers working in this field. The literature on ‘normativity’ has in a short time become overwhelmingly huge. So, a curious layperson might reasonably ask, ‘So, what is this ‘normativity’ then?’ This innocent little question might already be interrogation enough to make philosophers squirm and sweat, because it is hard to find any definition that every metanormative theorist can agree on [...]. At least one leading practitioner, Derek Parfit has recently gone so far as to claim that many philosophers who

appear to disagree with him about the nature of normativity must be using their terms with different meanings, and talking about something else entirely. [...] This paper [so Finlay's] finds, in partial agreement with Parfit, that philosophical discussion about 'normativity' is plagued by systematic ambiguities contributing to significant confusion, as there are many things that 'normativity' can reasonably be taken to be (Finlay 2018; cf. Parfit 2011).

If Finlay's analysis holds, then we need to make distinctions and add specifications to the terms "norm" and "normativity" in different contexts of argumentation. For this purpose, I turn to a philosophical discussion which may seem remote and already bypassed or surpassed. In order to make sense of the multitude of usages given to the terms "norm" and "normative" in contemporary philosophical debates, I want to revisit Georg Henrik von Wright's Gifford Lectures from 1959–1960, published as *Norm and Action: A Logical Enquiry* (1963). Even if the source is relatively old, its distinctions are still helpful, I think, in organizing the conceptual field of norms and normativity. Some of von Wright's distinctions are widely adopted in certain argumentative contexts, for example in jurisprudential and social-ontological discussions (e.g. Lorini & Zelaniec 2018; Passerini & Di Lucia 2017), while others are largely forgotten or ignored. To widen the perspective, I want to present the analysis as a whole and, at the end, draw some parallels to phenomenological philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. "The jungle"

According to von Wright, the term "norm" is used in six different senses in ordinary, scientific and philosophical discussions. By "norm" we can mean either (i) an enabling rule, (ii) a prescription, (iii) a directive, (iv) a custom, (v) a moral principle, or (vi) an ideal principle. Von Wright argues that all these six categories can be said to involve "norms" but in crucially different senses. So, what we have is not just six different specifications of one general concept of norm but a

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss phenomenological approaches to normativity more comprehensively in Heinämaa (2019).

peculiar type of ambiguity.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the field of norms is not just superficially obscure but is a "bewildering conceptual jungle" that needs clarification in order to allow for proper philosophical agreements and disagreements (von Wright 1963a, p. ix).<sup>3</sup>

More precisely, von Wright argues that the term "norm" is not genuinely ambiguous as is, for example, the English term "bank", which means both a financial institution and an edge of a river, or the term "duck", which means a waterbird, a type of fabric, and a score in cricket. Unlike genuinely ambiguous terms, von Wright argues, the term "norm" has several different meanings, yet meanings that are related to one another by complex logical-semantic connections. This means that even if a philosophical explication of the terminology of norms is urgently needed, the attempt to create a general theory covering the whole field in all dimensions would be futile (cf. von Wright 1963a, p. 10; Finlay 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> The situation is thus logically similar to that of the term "sign" according to Husserl's early analysis in his *Logical Investigations*. In *Phenomenology: Between Essentialism and Transcendental Philosophy* (1997), Jitendra Nath Mohanty emphasizes that for Husserl, expressions (*Ausdruck*) and indications (*Anzeige*) are not two different genera of signs (*Zeichen*) but are signs in two different but logically related senses (Mohanty 1997, p. 70; cf. Husserl 1984, 30ff.). In a similar manner, enabling rules, prescriptions and goals are not three different genera of norms but norms in three different but logically related senses.

<sup>3</sup> Von Wright uses the metaphor of *conceptual jungle* in the preface to *Norm and Action* to characterize the logical semantics of certain norms that he calls "directives" or "technical norms" in line with Kant. He writes: "The main topic of study in this book is *prescriptions*. Originally, I had planned to include in it also a fuller treatment of that which I call *technical norms* about means to end, and the closely related topic of *practical inference* (necessity). But I have come to realize that *this is an even more extensive and bewildering conceptual jungle* than the topic of prescriptions" (von Wright 1963a, p. ix; last italics added). As the comparative makes clear, the point is not merely to suggest that the field of directives or technical norms involves ambiguities and indeterminate boundaries but that this particular area of normativity is even more complicated and confused than the other sections. Thus, the field of normativity as a whole can be said to be a conceptual jungle and the area of directives can be characterized as one of its most densely twisted thickets.

If this also holds for contemporary philosophical debates and theorization, as Finlay's analysis suggests, then we would need more than one term to discuss the involuntary tendencies of human behavior, on the one hand, and the correctness of human action and interaction (moral or epistemic), on the other. And further, more terms would be needed for the philosophical discussion of the normative structures of beliefs, cognitions, emotions, aspirations, virtues and vocations.

Von Wright's manner of philosophizing about the different senses of normativity and goodness in *Norm and Action* and *The Varieties of Goodness* can be characterized as, broadly speaking, Wittgensteinian.<sup>4</sup> New research on his manuscripts and essays in the 1950s has made clear the indebtedness of these two works to Wittgenstein's late philosophy (e.g. Jakola 2020; Venturinha 2020).

The methodological idea that guides von Wright's enterprise is Wittgenstein's view according to which the task of a critical investigator is to bring theoretically invested words back to their "home places", that is, to their concrete and original contexts of usage (Wittgenstein [1953] 1997, §116). In Wittgenstein's account, many theoretical-philosophical problems issue from terminological confusions, not from states of affairs, worldly or transcendental. Words have lost contact with their proper contexts of usage and actual senses and float free, so to speak, between various disputes and debates. This terminological looseness creates quasi-problems, and extensive discursive exchanges for the solution of such problems.<sup>5</sup> The first task of the critical investigator is to illuminate

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<sup>4</sup> *The Varieties of Goodness* illuminates the debt that von Wright's philosophical reflections on goodness and normativity owe to Wittgenstein's later investigations. In the preface, von Wright states that he does not agree with Wittgenstein's characterization of goodness as a family-resemblance concept but at the same time emphasizes that he finds the critical tenor of Wittgenstein's inquiries crucial to all philosophy suffering from universalizing aspirations: "[T]he insight into the family-character of a concept may make us give up an attempt to hunt [...] for a common feature of all things falling under this concept which would explain to us why these things are classified together" (von Wright 1963b, pp. 15–16).

<sup>5</sup> In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein writes: "I cannot found a school because I do not really want to be imitated. Not at any rate by those who publish articles in journals" (Wittgenstein [1977] 1980, p. 61).

and clarify the grounds of such formations.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Wittgenstein, von Wright does not give up the goals of theory construction but he sees the importance of constraining the unifying tendencies of theorization by critical philosophical inquiries (e.g. von Wright 1963b, pp. 15–16; cf. note 12 on page 14).

Inspired by this Wittgensteinian principle, I want to revisit von Wright's *Norm and Action* and *The Varieties of Goodness* and offer, on their basis, a set of philosophical-semantic distinctions that together illuminate what all can be meant by the terms "norm" and "normativity".<sup>7</sup> I have chosen to pro-

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<sup>6</sup> In general, Wittgenstein's critical investigations work against misguided aspirations for philosophical theory-building (e.g., [1953] 1997, §109). In §118, he asks: "Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble)." His answer makes clear that the constructions that his critique dismantles have little if any permanent worth: "What we are destroying is nothing but formations of wind [*Luftgebäude*] and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand" ([1953] 1997, §118, translation modified, cf. §111).

The original German term that Wittgenstein uses here is "*Luftgebäude*" which means a mechanical formation, made by wind. Thus, his argument is that philosophical theorization largely consists of linguistic confusions and is not supported by sufficiently clear insight and free deliberation. In §133, we read: "The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question." By this Wittgenstein does not suggest that there would not be proper philosophical problems. On the contrary, he argues that one particular species of philosophical sickness is the loss of all problems: "Some philosophers (or whatever you like to call them) suffer from what can be called 'loss of problems.' Then everything seems quite simple to them, no deep problems seem to exist anymore, the world becomes broad and flat and loses all depth; and what they write seems immeasurably shallow and trivial" (Wittgenstein [1967] 1970, §456).

<sup>7</sup> In the Preface to *Norm and Action*, von Wright explains that the problems encountered by his early deontic logic of obligations and permissions (1951) had led him to new reflections in the hope of establishing a more solid approach with tools more suitable for the analysis of action and its dynamism. So, despite the flourishing of deontic logic, he saw the need for a new beginning. However, the scope of this new enterprise was not to

ceed in this manner, since I find von Wright's critical discussions of the ambiguities of the term "norm" helpful for the clarification and organization of contemporary philosophy of normativity. Thus, I will not follow his analyses into specific norm types but want to explicate his general account of the semantics of normativity which prepares the ground for the analyses of *Norm and Action*.

Von Wright first distinguishes between three *principal senses* in which the term "norm" can be used. "Norm" can mean (i) an enabling rule (also: constitutive rule), (ii) a prescription, and (iii) a directive (also: technical norm). What is meant by

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construe a general theory of norms or normativity but to focus on the logic of prescriptions and practical inference. In this context, he characterizes the difficulties of his earlier approach as fundamental: "The building of Deontic Logic has thus turned out to be a much more radical departure from existing logical theory than I at first realized. The more I have become aware of the complications connected with the subject, the more have I been compelled to narrow my claims to be able to treat it in a systematic and thorough way. What is here accomplished, if anything, covers only a small part of the ground which has to be cleared before Deontic Logic stands on a firm footing" (von Wright 1963b, p. ix). The first chapter of *Norm and Action* substantiates this decision by reference to the semantic complexities of the field of normativity: "Since the field of meaning of 'norm' is not only heterogenous but also has vague boundaries it would probably be futile to try to create a General Theory of Norms covering the whole field. The theory of norms must be somehow restricted in its scope" (von Wright 1963b, p. 1).

By distinguishing between six (to eight) components of prescriptions, von Wright extracts a threefold "norm-kernel" that includes the character, the content and the condition of application of the prescription (von Wright 1963a, p. 70; cf. 1963b, p. 157). He then hypothesizes that also other norms include identical or similar kernels and, on the basis of this, proceeds to put forward his new deontic logic as a logic of norm-kernels: "The norm-kernel is a logical structure which prescriptions have in common with other types of norms. There may however exist specific differences between the kernels of norms of different types. Here we are directly concerned with the kernels of prescriptions only. [...] The formal theory of norms or Deontic Logic which we are going to develop in later chapters of this work is essentially a *theory of norm-kernels*. Since the kernels are the common ingredients of all or nearly all types of norms this formal theory may with some caution be regarded as a 'basic logic' of norms in general" (von Wright 1963b, p. 70, italics added).

"norm" in all these main cases is some kind of direction or regulation that guides human action or behavior (or human ways of relating) in one way or another. However, the sense of directing and regulating is essentially different in these three cases.

Further, von Wright then argues that by taking into account these three primary senses of the term "norm", we can also talk about (iv) customs, (v) moral principles, and (vi) ideal principles as norms. However, when we thus extend the usage of the term "norm", we must keep in mind that some of the main ingredients of normativity, identified in the three principal cases, may be missing and that correspondingly some new aspects may become prevalent.

In the following, I will first examine von Wright's three principal usages of the term "norm" and then clarify also the three additional usages.

## 2. Enabling rules

The first concept of norm that von Wright distinguishes is that of an *enabling rule* (also: constitutive rule). This is a norm that establishes or institutes an activity and/or practice. What is essential to enabling or constitutive rules is that they determine the steps or moves of the activity at issue and thereby define the activity itself (von Wright 1963a, 6–7). A paradigmatic example here is the rule of a game, for example, chess, Klondike or basketball. All games are characterized by normative concepts such as "correct", "permitted", "prohibited", and "obligatory". However, a failure to follow the rules of basketball or those of chess is very different from the failure to obey a military command or the failure to follow the directives of use attached to a new medicine. Moreover, all these types of failures differ from the epistemic and perceptual "failures" of not capturing all relevant aspects of an object as well as from the morally relevant cases in which one ignores an appeal or plea.

Two other cases of enabling rules are epistemologically more interesting and more central than the rules of games. These are the rules of grammars and the rules of logical and



mathematical calculi.<sup>8</sup> Both resemble rules of games in delimiting forms of activity *in toto*.

Von Wright emphasizes that failures to act according to the enabling norms of games, languages, and logical and mathematical calculi are characterized by a peculiar kind of duality of two alternative interpretations. Breaking the rules of a game can be understood in two alternative ways: we can either say that the person makes a mistake in playing and plays incorrectly or else we can judge that she is not playing at all, not taking part in the relevant activity at all (even if she seems to make the characteristic moves or steps):

Of a person who does not speak according to the rules of grammar we say either that [s]he speaks incorrectly or that [s]he does not speak *that language*. The grounds of saying the one or the other are very much the same as the grounds for saying of a person either that [s]he plays the game incorrectly or does not play *it* [this game] at all (von Wright 1963a, p. 11).

There is also an important difference between the enabling or constitutive norms of natural grammars and those of mathematical and logical calculi: whereas norms of grammars have long and thick histories, the histories of calculi are “poor” (von Wright 1963a, p. 7). This essential historicity of linguistic rules is bound to their dynamic character; the enabling norms of grammars are in a constant process of slow “natural” change. This does not entail that changes in grammars would be decided in negotiations between language users or established by commands of linguistic authorities. Notwithstanding their deeply social and cultural character, norms of languages are not coined, instituted, or established by any particular people. Rather, they come about in dynamic language use as such. This means that human languages have an “organic character” (von Wright 1963a, p. 7).

### 3. Prescriptions

The second category of norms distinguished by von Wright are *prescriptions*. Paradigmatic cases include national and in-

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<sup>8</sup> For Husserl’s account of the norms of logic and their different dimensions, see, e.g., Hartimo 2018; 2020.

ternational laws, military commands, traffic rules and parental directions.<sup>9</sup> These are norms issued or given by an agent and addressed to and directed at other agents. Von Wright calls "norm-authority" the prescription-issuing party and "norm-subject(s)" the party to whom the norm-authority gives the norms.

The norm-authority is a willing agent of some sort, individual or collective. The king, the people and God are well-known examples of such authorities. Prescriptive norms can be said to have their "source" in and "flow" from the will of the norm-authority; the authority can be said to "want" the subject(s) to adopt a certain conduct or form of action; and the giving of the norm can be said to "manifest" the authority's will. Thus, the framework of prescriptions is, in von Wright's analysis, fundamentally volitional or conative.

In addition to this authority-subjects relation, prescriptions also have two other distinguishing features, in von Wright's analysis. First, they are promulgated or promoted on the part of the law-authority by symbols and marks, for example by written documents or by repeated forms of speech. This is a crucial aspect of prescriptive norms: the authority needs to promulgate and distribute her prescriptions in order to make her will known to her subjects. Second, prescriptions always come with sanctions or threat of punishment of some sort: "In order to make its will *effective* the authority attaches a sanction or threat of punishment to the norm" (von Wright 1963a, p. 7; italics added; cf. pp. 125–126).

Prescriptions differ from the enabling norms of language and logical calculi in all four respects: whereas a prescription necessarily involves a norm-authority and norm-subject(s) as well as systems of distribution and punishment, an enabling rule of grammar or of logical calculus functions independently of norm-givers and, correlatively, the agents who follow these rules are not norm-subjects. For example, when one learns the rules of a game, say basketball, one learns certain ways of moving in the field and at the same time also the fact that certain steps are allowed while others are prohibited.

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<sup>9</sup> Von Wright mentions (criminal) laws as examples of prescriptions but this does not entail that he would argue that judicial systems would be merely or primarily prescriptive.

These are neither prescriptions by some agent nor conditional norms that dictate that if one wants to play basketball then one needs to do this and that. Rather what we have are limiting conditions of the activity to be learned. Referees guard against steps, accidental or deliberate, that do not belong to the game, not against actions that are part of the general behavioral repertoire of humans but have been banned by a decision of an authority, individual or collective.

Or take another example, one in which enabling norms are lost. A demented person may lose her basic linguistic capacity and the mastery of the enabling norms of language, such as the syntactical rules that define the sentential and clausal structures of (the) language. When this happens, she may be subjected to diverse forms of therapeutic treatments, pharmacological, occupational or other. These treatments are not sanctions or forms of punishment that would coerce the person to behave in the way willed by some authority but are treatments meant to help her regain the condition in which she may relearn to master the rules of language that allow her to form sentences, or at least some of these rules. We may of course say that the enabling norms of language or those of logical calculi "prescribe" our speaking and thinking, but this is a metaphorical parlance and depends in its sense on the primary usage of "prescribe" in which definite norm-authorities prescribe behaviors or types of behavior to particular norm-subjects.

Von Wright's distinction between enabling rules and prescriptions thus draws attention to a habit of thought that tends to dominate contemporary discussions concerning norms and normativity, in many political, pedagogical and moral contexts. We easily take all norms to be prescriptions or essentially similar to prescriptions. More particularly, we tend to assume that most norms and rules operate like traditional laws, that is, by sanctions and punishments. When no clear penalties can be identified, we easily construe quasi-sanctions in our thoughts and end up presenting, for example, various psychological and social harms as such.

#### 4. Directives

The third category that von Wright distinguishes is the category of directives (also: technical norms). These are norms with means-ends structures, that is, norms that operate as determining means for the sake of attaining certain willed ends: "They presuppose ends of human action and necessary relationships of acts to these ends" (von Wright 1963a, p. 15). Examples of such norms include directives of use for medicines, instruments and technical devices.

The distinguishing feature of directives is that they have the logical form of the conditional. Accordingly, their standard formulation is an if-then sentence in which the antecedent specifies a willed or wanted thing and the consequent specifies what must, what has to or what ought to be done (or not) for the wanted thing to be achieved. Von Wright emphasizes this structural feature and argues that directives are logically neither prescriptive nor descriptive but exactly conditional and involve a specification of a volition in their antecedent (von Wright 1963a, p. 10; cf. 1963b, p. 160ff.). As such, these norms differ from both enabling rules and prescriptions which both are categorical in their logical form.

This must not be taken to imply that all conditionals would be directives or involve such norms. Von Wright draws attention to two other categories of conditional norms neither of which involves a volition (von Wright 1963a, pp. 10, 101). He calls "hypothetical" the norms that are formulated by if-then sentences but do not involve specification of a willed goal and a means to such a goal. Rather than concerning volitional aims, hypothetical norms concern contingent circumstances and order what should be done if a certain contingency arises. An example of such hypothetical behavioural norms would be the preventive measure "If the dog barks do not run!" or the instruction "You must tell me, if you hear any rumours about them". The third type of conditional norms are called "anankastic". These are norms that state necessary conditions between goals and actions, independently of anybody's volitions. An example of such a conditional is "If the house is to be made habitable it ought to be heated" (von Wright 1963a, p. 10; cf. 1963b, p. 158ff.).

Thus defined, directives and prescriptions depend on the human will: prescriptions issue from someone's will and directives involve voluntarily posited goals. This distinguishes both from enabling or constitutive rules that do not depend on anybody's will or volition. On the other hand, prescriptions and enabling rules are both categorical in von Wright's analysis, lacking the conditional character of directives (cf. Kelsen [1925] 1991, pp. 349–350).

Von Wright argues that his tripartite distinction between enabling norms, prescriptive norms and directives covers the main senses of normativity operative in philosophical discussion (von Wright 1963a, pp. 15–16). These three senses are primitive in that they cannot be defined by one another and by any further sense of "norm". However, von Wright identifies three additional senses of the term "norm" that combine elements of these basic ones but also add new elements. These additional types of norms are: (iv) customs (also: social habits), (v) moral principles and (vi) ideal principles. I will illuminate their specific characteristics in the following three sections.

## 5. Customs

Customs or social habits have certain similarities with both enabling rules and prescriptions, but they cannot be categorized as either since they also differ from both in important respects. Examples of such norms include the cultural norms of greeting, eating, dressing, marrying and burying the dead. These vary across lived space and time.

Customs are similar to prescriptions in directing or "regulating" behaviors and influencing the conducts of both individuals and groups. They can be said to be "acquired" by whole communities and "imposed" on their individual members. Thus, customs like prescriptions exert "normative pressure" on individuals.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, they involve various

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<sup>10</sup> Another important similarity between customs and prescriptions is that both differ from the regularities of nature in respect to deviations. Individual members can violate the customs of the community and "break" its habits in an analogous way as they can break the law. In contrast, deterministic "laws" of physics do not allow any exceptions, and statistical "laws" of nature that do allow exceptional occurrences are not violated by exceptions.

punitive measures "whereby the community reacts to those members who do not conform to its customs" (von Wright 1963a, 9).<sup>11</sup>

Despite these similarities, von Wright argues, customs and prescriptions also differ in crucial respects: most importantly, customs lack authoritative source and promulgation methods and processes (von Wright 1963a, pp. 9, 25; 1963b, pp. 158–159). On this basis, von Wright argues that even if customs may be characterized as "anonymous and implicit prescriptions" on the basis of their similarities with genuine prescriptions, they should not be reified or mystified by suggesting that the historical communities or cultures that acquire them and impose them on their members would be norm-authorities:

[T]here are important differences [...] between customs and prescriptions. Customs first of all are not given by any authority to subjects. If we can speak of an authority behind the custom at all this authority would be the community itself including both its past and its present members. Customs could aptly be characterized as anonymous norms or prescriptions. But this characterization must not encourage any mysticism about the community as a norm-giver (von Wright 1963a, pp. 17–18).

The second, and related, difference is that even though deviations from customs may be "punished" by social marginalization and exclusion (cf. Doyon & Breyer 2015, p. 1), such punishments are very different from punishments by law or prescriptions more generally, both in terms of content and in terms of execution and its conditions. In the former case, the norm-breaker is shunned, ostracized, marginalized and/or "cast out" from most or all social interaction; in the second case, she is subjected to a specific physical or economic restriction, such as fining, imprisonment, dismemberment or death (von Wright 1963a, p. 9). Again, one should not blur the difference between the two types of norms by talking

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<sup>11</sup> This difference was obscured in 20<sup>th</sup> century political analyses which, inspired by Foucault's and Deleuze's analyses of power, paralleled political projects and subversive actions with mutations and transformations of vital forces (e.g. Butler 1990, p. 145; Braidotti 2002, p. 134ff.; cf. Rand 2011).

about social “punishments” as retributions or about the social outcast as an outlaw.

Customs are similar to enabling rules in determining complete ways of acting and living characteristic of communities. They are also similar in having thick histories and dynamic ways of changing and developing. These similarities should not lead us to overlook an essential difference in the manners in which these two types of norms determine their characteristic activities. This difference concerns the coverage of the norm: Whereas the enabling rules of playing, speaking or thinking define all possible “moves” of these activities, customs merely differentiate between approved and non-approved behaviors, both of which remain possible within the community. Greeting, for example, is highly customary in most communities and violations against this norm are often strongly disapproved. However, a person who never greets anybody is both thinkable and tolerable in all such communities. Eventually such a person may become an outcast, but this status does not make her an outlaw nor a mere onlooker of social exchanges. By using the metaphor of gaming, we can say that the “moves” of such a person are highly unusual and also disapproved by the other “players” of “the social game”, but despite their exceptional and condemned character they are still moves of the game, moves countered by other moves and moves responded to by other players.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, “customs resemble [enabling] rules in that they determine or quasi-define certain patterns of conduct – and prescriptions in that they exert a ‘normative pressure’ on the members of a community to conform to these patterns” (von Wright 1963a, p. 16). They differ, however, crucially from enabling rules in the manner in which they determine behavior and from prescriptions in the type of pressure that they exercise.

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<sup>12</sup> Émile Durkheim’s discussion of rules and norms in his *The Division of Labor in Society* (*De la division du travail social*, 1893) serves as an example of overambitious theoretization which models all norm types on one specific type, in this case customs (and prescriptions) (p. 121ff.).

## 6. Moral principles

Moral principles, which are also called "moral rules" and "moral laws", are the second additional category of norms that von Wright distinguishes. The paradigmatic example of a moral norm is the one that obliges us to keep our promises. Other examples include the norm according to which children ought to honor their parents, the principle that the innocent should not be punished, and the golden rule according to which one should love one's neighbor as one loves oneself. The coverages of such principles vary greatly. Some are highly context-dependent while others are absolute. For example, the moral rules of sexual ethics seem to depend greatly on contextual factors, whereas the commands "Do not kill!" and "Respect the elderly!" have an absolute character.

Von Wright draws attention to the fact that moral principles are traditionally and still often taken to be either a subspecies of prescriptions or else a subspecies of directives. The third alternative, common in philosophical literature, is to argue that these norms are *sui generis*. Von Wright rejects all three analyses and argues that in truth moral principles do not belong to any logically distinct category of norms nor do they form a category of their own. Instead, they combine features of several other types of norms, most importantly features of enabling norms, prescriptions and customs. And not only this, but more: different cases of moral principles combine logically different normative features and do this in several different ways. Thus, the category of moral principles is logically heterogenous in von Wright's analysis:

The peculiarity of moral norms as I see them is not that they form an autonomous group of their own; it is rather that they have complicated logical affinities to the other main types of norms and to the value-notion of good and evil. To understand the nature of moral norms is therefore not to discover some unique feature in them [structural or other]; it is to survey their complex relationships to a number of other things (von Wright 1963a, p. 13).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On this basis, von Wright attacks both theistic, utilitarian and eudaimonistic ethics by arguing that moral norms are neither prescriptions by authorities nor conditional directives defined by willed goals. Moreover,



Some moral principles are, according to von Wright, similar to the enabling rules of language and logical calculi in constituting complete forms of action while others are more like customs in being contextual or situational. For example, the obligation to keep one's promise is similar to an enabling rule of grammar in defining the institution of giving and taking promises. In contrast, sexual ethics includes custom-like moral principles, such as the norms against inbreeding and the norms against zoophilia and bestiality (von Wright 1963a, 12).<sup>14</sup>

Neither are all moral principles prescriptions, heteronomous or autonomous. Prescriptions have an important role to play in moral education and in the expression of morality, but this should not be taken to imply that all moral principles would have the logical character of prescriptions (Wright 1963a, 12–13). In this context, von Wright also argues that self-regulating “commands” must be kept separate from authority-based prescriptions: “Such ‘autonomous’ prescriptions given by man to himself are [...] very unlike the ‘heteronomous’ prescriptions, categorical or hypothetical, given by a norm-authority to some norm-subjects. It is doubtful whether one should call the former ‘prescriptions’ at all” (von Wright 1963a, p. 11). This means that philosophical discussions on self-regulation must not be modelled on authority-based regulations by others.

On the basis of this analysis, von Wright attacks similarly theistic, utilitarian and eudaemonistic ethics, arguing that moral norms are neither prescriptions by authorities nor conditional technical norms defined by willed goals. Moreover,

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he also rejects deontic theories by arguing that moral norms are not *sui generis*. Ultimately, von Wright contends that the logical heterogeneity of moral norms cannot be philosophically elucidated without a profound analysis of the various senses of goodness and the good, that is, the sense of value. What turns out to be logically foundational is the concept of the goodness of human being. Thus, as pointed out above, von Wright's analyses in *Norm and Action* point to *The Varieties of Goodness* (1963).

<sup>14</sup> Von Wright seems to be informed here by the work of another Finnish philosopher Edward Westermarck who studied the cultural and historical nature of various moral norms in his widely influential anthropological treatises, most importantly *The History of Human Marriage* (1890) and *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* (1906).

he also rejects deontic theories on the basis that moral norms are not *sui generis* either. Ultimately, he then contends that the logical heterogeneity of moral norms cannot be philosophically elucidated without a profound analysis of the various senses of goodness and the good, that is, the sense of value. What turns out to be logically foundational is the concept of the goodness of human being. Thus, von Wright's analyses in *Norm and Action* point to his parallel work on *The Varieties of Goodness* (1963).

## 7. Ideal principles

The final sense in which we speak about norms, distinguished by von Wright, is the sense of ideal principles. These are not norms of doing, acting or behaving but are norms of *being*. Here von Wright draws directly from the phenomenologist Max Scheler's distinctions between "*Tunsollen*" and "*Seinsollen*" and between "normative ought" (*normatives Sollen*) and "ideal ought" (*ideales Sollen*) and argues that the normativity of doing and that of being must be kept distinct, since the former implies the concept of *rule-following* while the latter suggests that adherence to norms is like *seeking something* or constantly *striving for something* (von Wright 1963a, p. 15).<sup>15</sup>

Examples of ideal principles include norms that articulate ethical virtues and norms that govern professional excellences. When we state, for instance, that a human person ought to be generous, truthful or just, we express, in von Wright's analysis, a moral norm that has the logical character of an ideal principle; and when we strive for these perfections, then we act according to an ideal principle which is part of morality. Analogously, when one points out that a university professor should be patient with her students but at the same time also firm, then one states an ideal principle of teaching. And if one then acts with firmness and patience in the class room, despite possible complaints, then one is striving for

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<sup>15</sup> When making the distinction between norms as rules and prescriptions and norms as ideal principles, von Wright refers explicitly to Scheler's *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (1913–1916) but also to Nicolai Hartmann's *Ethik* (1926) and G.E. Moore's "The nature of moral philosophy" (1922) (von Wright 1963a, pp. 14–22).

professional excellence, not accommodating oneself to traditional academic conventions or following the latest pedagogical directives issued from the administration.

Such striving or seeking to be good at something (teaching or leading a research community) may occasionally demand that one questions or abandons the traditional norms and standards that regulate the practicing of the profession in one's own community. More radically, sometimes one may also need to act against the general conventions that regulate the profession globally across communities and even whole cultures, contemporary and past. In this way, one may become a social outcast but that does not imply that one would have lost one's task and obligation as a professional. Instead, one may act as a reformer or revolutionary. Ideal principles thus differ from norms understood as customs or social habits: in the case of such norms, one's responsibility is primarily for the ideal, not to the fellow practitioners of the profession (cf. Frankfurt 2004; Heinämaa 2014; Melle 2007; 2002).

In having this goal-oriented character, ideal principles may seem similar to directives. Von Wright argues, however, that we must not make the logical mistake of confusing our striving for professional, epistemic or moral ideals with the processes in which we follow directives and try to achieve goals. This is because ideal principles resemble enabling or constitutive norms: they are not motivational causes for our actions but are conditions that define ways of being.

There is a certain similarity between ideal rules and [directives]. Striving for the ideal resembles the pursuit of an end. It would however be a mistake to think of the ideal rules as norms concerning means to ends. In order to be a good teacher a man ought to have such and such qualities. [...] But those qualities of a man which determine his goodness as a teacher are not causally related to the ideal – as the use of ladder may be a causal prerequisite of fetching a book from a shelf. The former relation is conceptual (logical). The ideal rules determine a concept, e.g. the

concept of a (good) teacher or soldier. In this they are similar to rules of a game (von Wright 1963a, p. 15).<sup>16</sup>

For example, let us assume that the ideal principle of being a teacher includes the task (regulative idea) of being both firm and kind. If this holds, then a teacher must address and treat her students firmly and kindly. This must not be construed as a conditional that dictates that if someone settles to be a teacher, then she must act firmly and kindly toward students. Rather than specifying causally, functionally or motivationally what the person needs to do in order to figure or operate as a teacher, the ideal principle defines what it entails to be a teacher.

By defining ways of being, ideal principles govern actions and types of action but also *modes* of acting (cf. Audi 2016). Whatever the soldier does, he is obliged to act bravely and in a disciplined manner; analogously, firmness and kindness should characterize the attitude of a teacher in her various activities; and finally, the virtuous person with moral integrity is expected to act justly and honestly in all her dealings (cf. von Wright 1963b, p. 139). An academic who addresses his colleagues respectfully but criticizes his students dismissingly and scornfully is not a good teacher (or scholar) and, depending on the gravity of her manners, may not be a teacher (or scholar) at all.

## 8. Epilogue: phenomenological perspective

As pointed out above, in his discussion of ideal principles, von Wright refers to the analyses of two early phenomenologists, Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann. Both contribute to the critical discussion of normativity by offering axiological analysis of the relations between rules of action, on the one hand, and values, on the other hand. Both argue that values as such do not regulate actions. Values are ideal principles of being and as such they merely determine what ought to *be* without commanding or dictating what must be *done*. This "normative inertness" of values in respect to action is due to

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<sup>16</sup> Von Wright also uses the term "ideal rules" for ideal principles. He decides this on the basis that ideal principles are similar to enabling or constitutive rules in delineating and defining complete forms of activities.

their structure: they do not contain in themselves any reference to volitions or acts of willing, integral to action.<sup>17</sup> The value of beauty, for example, “demands” that beauty ought to be, but it does not thereby command any beautiful actions or actions approximating or pursuing beauty. Only when considered by a willing and reflective subject, Scheler and Hartmann contend, can an ideal value mobilize and direct action (Scheler 1913–1916, pp. 187–188, 214; Hartmann 1926, pp. 154–159, 171–172; cf. Hessen 1958, pp. 83–84; Kelly 2011, pp. 110–112).

Von Wright agrees on this basic point. In the chapter titled “‘Good’ and ‘Must’” in *The Varieties of Goodness*, he attacks the common notion according to which the concepts of value and goodness are intrinsically normative (von Wright 1963b, p. 155ff.). His account is similar to Scheler’s and Hartmann’s in suggesting that action can become value-directed but only on the basis of volition and its imperatives: “I tend to think that it is only the aspect of norms as practical necessities [...] which bears an intrinsic relationship to ideas of the good. Other aspects of the normative may become value-oriented only through the intermediary of the [practically necessitating] aspect” (von Wright 1963b, p. 177).

The main divergence between von Wright and his phenomenological predecessors is in questions concerning the dependency relations between norms and values. Both Scheler and Harman explicitly contend that the norms of moral action (obligations) are founded on moral values (e.g. Scheler 1913–1916, p. 187; Hartman 1926, p. 159). Von Wright, by contrast, maintains that the question concerning the foundational relations between norms and values should not be decided on the basis of analyses focused on moral norms and values exclusively. Rather, the task is to widen the perspective and also

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<sup>17</sup> In Hartmann’s analysis, a value essentially involves an obligation of being (*Seinsollen*) (Hartmann 1926, pp. 154–156). Scheler, in contrast, contends that as ideal objectivities, values do not involve any obliging moments whatsoever, neither obligations of being nor obligations of doing. They become obliging, however, when they are considered in relation to a possible reality. This as such does not, in Scheler’s analysis, transform them to norms of doing or acting. What is needed for such a modification, he agrees with Hartman, is a reference to striving or willing (Scheler 1913–1916, p. 187).

inquire into the relations between diverse extra-moral norms and values:

It seems to me that the discussion of the relations between norms and values even in recent times has suffered from the narrowing and obscuring implications of the term 'moral'. If we want to get to know what values as such have to do with norms as such or to know the general nature of the connection, if there is one, between norms and values, we must disentangle the two from their associations with morality and study them in the widest possible generality (von Wright 1963b, p. 156).

The phenomenological tradition offers original insights that promote this course of investigation. It entails an argument about epistemic norms that parallels Scheler's and Hartman's arguments about moral norms. We find this argument in Edmund Husserl's *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1927). In this work, Husserl contends that sciences in general are regulated not by mere norms of reasoning but more fundamentally by ideal principles of being. The logical laws that guide the scientists do not operate by ruling over their activities of inferring, proving or arguing but by conditioning the ideal structures and formations (*Gebilde*) that they aim at, that is, evident and true concepts, judgments, theories and, ultimately, sciences themselves as a complicated system of such formations (Husserl [1927] 1974, pp. 228–230/258–260; cf. Hartimo 2018; 2019; 2020).

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