

NORMATIVE UNCERTAINTY WITHOUT UNJUSTIFIED VALUE COMPARISON

A RESPONSE TO CARR

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NORMATIVE UNCERTAINTY is uncertainty about *normative* questions, such as whether it is permissible to eat fish (or whether the suffering of fish is as intrinsically bad as human suffering), in contrast to *empirical* questions such as whether fish feel pain (or whether their suffering can be as intense as human suffering). What strategy would it be rational to use for making practical decisions under (purely) normative uncertainty?¹ Jennifer Rose Carr's 2020 paper, "Normative Uncertainty without Theories," defends the strategy of choosing the option with the highest expected value against worries concerning *intertheoretic value comparison* (hereafter "IVC").² To illustrate these worries in the way that I find most persuasive, consider the following example:

Extani is uncertain whether it is OK to eat fish because he is uncertain whether to adopt W.D. Ross's normative theory or Peter Singer's, justifiably assuming that each would support a different answer.

Maximizing expected value requires cardinal comparisons of the units of value across the relevant theories.³ Extani's case does not allow such comparisons based on what Christian Tarsney calls "intertheoretic agreement."⁴ Neither could structural methods for commensuration be applied here (if anywhere) without unjustified arbitrariness.⁵ If there is a way to justify IVC in Extani's case,

- 1 For the *moral* importance of coping with such uncertainty, see Aboodi, "One Thought Too Few."
- 2 Carr, "Normative Uncertainty without Theories," 755. I use the term "value" in this context interchangeably with "utility" as Carr uses this term, and with "choice-worthiness."
- 3 Carr, "Normative Uncertainty without Theories," 750.
- 4 Tarsney, "Intertheoretic Value Comparison." Note that Carr identifies a problem with Tarsney's approach ("Normative Uncertainty without Theories," 759–60).
- 5 This applies to methods proposed in Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and Its Consequences*; Ross,

despite the known problems, it has not been published yet (to the best of my knowledge).⁶

Carr neither defends nor wants to rely on the justifiability of IVC. What makes Carr's proposal unique is her claim that one could maximize expected value under normative uncertainty *without* IVC. According to Carr, her proposal avoids IVC simply because it avoids *theories*.⁷ Carr envisions agents who distribute their credence not among normative theories, but among *hypotheses about the objective values of the options at hand*. These are the values assigned by "the utility function determined by whichever moral theory is in fact correct," hereafter *the ideal normative function*.⁸ While this function may be unique only up to positive affine transformation, the ratios of the differences between its assigned values must agree with the objective normative truth.⁹ I suggest precisifying the ideal normative function as follows: a function whose expected-value maximization under *nonnormative* uncertainty generates decisions that are in line with the *correct normative views*.¹⁰ But my argument could work with some other precisifications as well.

I agree with Carr that the problem of IVC does not stand in the way once an agent rationally distributes her credence only among candidate specifications of the ideal normative function that share the same unit of value. However, this leaves us with what I will call the *justificatory problem of IVC*: how to reach such a credal distribution justifiably. I diagnose the difficulty of doing so in section 1. Carr does not provide any illustration of justifiably reaching a credal distribution of the type she requires, nor an argument for this potential justifiability. This raises the worry that no such credal distribution could ever be justified, which implies that Carr's proposal cannot be (justifiably) implemented. My first aim is to show how some such credal distributions could be justified, thereby allaying this worry. Some of Carr's formulations create the impression that the solvability of the justificatory problem of IVC turns on whether or not the agent's uncertainty is about *theories* as such; but I will argue that this claim would be false. More-

"Rejecting Ethical Deflationism," 764–65; and Sepielli, "What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do."

6 Concerning the relevant problems, see Sepielli, "Moral Uncertainty and the Principle of Equity among Moral Theories"; Gustafsson and Torpman, "In Defence of My Favourite Theory," 163–64; Hedden "Does MITE Make Right?" 112; and Carr, "Normative Uncertainty without Theories," 752–53.

7 Carr, "Normative Uncertainty without Theories," 755.

8 Carr, "Normative Uncertainty without Theories," 754.

9 Carr, "Normative Uncertainty without Theories," 756–57.

10 I will not focus on addressing metaphysical worries concerning IVC in this paper, but my precisification of the ideal normative function above constitutes a beginning of an answer to some of them.

over, I will identify other features of the agent's epistemic state that are more relevant for determining whether she can justifiably reach a credal distribution among candidate specifications of the ideal normative function that share the same unit of value. Helping to illuminate the conditions for this justifiability is my second aim.

In section 1, first, I use a variation on Extani's case to illustrate how the justificatory problem of IVC can persist even when the agent focuses directly on functions rather than theories. It does not seem that Carr's proposal can be justifiably implemented in such a case. Second, generalizing from this case, I suggest that the justificatory problem of IVC (normally) constitutes a serious obstacle to maximizing expected value justifiably whenever the defining features of the normative hypotheses with which the agent starts out do not refer to the same unit of value.

Third, aided by this diagnosis, I identify a type of normative uncertainty wherein the agent may justifiably conceive of all the relevant normative hypotheses as referring to the same unit of value. This would allow the agent to maximize expected value along Carr's lines (allaying the implementation worry). I focus on normative uncertainty that stems from indecisive normative intuitions. Despite being one of the most common types of normative uncertainty, it has not been sufficiently examined in the relevant literature. I will illustrate such normative uncertainty in section 2, and argue that Carr's proposal can be justifiably implemented in particular instantiations of it.

1. THE JUSTIFICATORY PROBLEM OF INTERTHEORETIC VALUE COMPARISON

To see that the justificatory problem of IVC does not dissipate merely by avoiding theories, consider the following variation on Extani's case:

Extani* is uncertain whether it is permissible to eat fish because he is uncertain whether to side with W.D. Ross or Peter Singer, just like Extani. But Extani* is not thinking of their *theories* as such. Extani* finds a new blog where Singer argues that, for practical questions of this type, his view should be implemented by maximizing the expected value of function F_1 . Additionally—in an exciting historical breakthrough—Extani* digs up an old manuscript by Ross that endorses maximizing the expected value of F_2 . He is thus uncertain which function will generate the right verdict on whether to eat fish.

Had Extani*'s uncertainty led him to distribute his credence among F_1 and F_2 and maximize the expected value (without normalization), this would have

been unjustified, because there is no reason to think that F_1 and F_2 share the same unit of value. In order to reach a justified decision, Extani* must find a justified “exchange rate” between the unit that F_1 uses and the unit that F_2 uses. (Carr neither provides guidance for Extani* on how to do so, nor a reason to think that doing so is possible in Extani*’s case.)

I propose the following diagnosis of the difficulty of solving the justificatory problem of IVC: if the normative hypotheses with which the agent starts out (whether they constitute theories, functions, or other types of normative hypotheses) do not refer to the same unit of value, it is hard to imagine how the agent could have access to facts that determine the right “exchange rate” among their units of value (if any such facts exist). This seems typical when the source of the normative uncertainty is trusting experts or peer disagreement.

In light of this diagnosis, it makes sense to turn our attention to situations wherein the facts that determine the right IVCs are directly accessible from the agent’s perspective. Such is the case when the agent constructs all the relevant normative hypotheses on her own, and does so by reference to the same unit of value, so that the right intertheoretic comparisons are trivially derived from the *defining features* of the hypotheses. This seems natural in some epistemic states wherein the source of normative uncertainty is the agent’s *indecisive normative intuitions*. (I use this term in a broad sense, covering any uncertainty or inconsistency at the level of intuitive normative judgments, or normative “seemings.”) In some such epistemic states, the agent may justifiably construct each normative hypothesis—by reference to the same unit of value—on the basis of a different, internally consistent subset of her own intuitive normative judgments. In the following section I illustrate such a case.

I will rely on two preliminary assumptions. First, the relevant justifiability ultimately turns on the agent’s relevant *evidence* (in the broad sense that covers all the elements in the agent’s epistemic state that may have a role in justifying her credence). Second, normative intuitions can be part of the relevant evidence, providing at least an initial, defeasible justificatory force.¹¹

2. JUSTIFIABLE VALUE COMPARISONS UNDER INDECISIVE NORMATIVE INTUITIONS

Consider Inti, whose uncertainty about whether it is permissible to eat fish

11 The justificatory force of intuitions is endorsed by proponents of the “reflective equilibrium” method (such as Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics”), as well as intuitionists (such as Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*). I consider my relevant assumption above as weaker than each of these views.

stems from indecisive normative intuitions. On the one hand, it seems to her that the normative significance of animal suffering is negligible when compared to human matters. On the other hand, this intuition seems suspicious to Inti because it implies some sort of problematic speciesism.

Fortunately, Inti is having lunch with “Carr*”:

1. Inti: This fish looks yummy. But I don’t know whether to eat it, due to the indecisive intuitions I told you about.
2. Carr*: I wonder whether my research could come in handy here. Can we give it a shot?
3. Inti: Sure!
4. Carr*: OK, let’s start by assuming that there’s nothing wrong with your intuitive judgment that animal suffering is negligible when compared to human matters. Could you evaluate your options under this assumption first? You have two options: *Eat* and *Avoid*.
5. Inti: Well, I’d assign a higher value to *Eat* than to *Avoid*, given our assumption. And I can say that *Eat* would be better than normatively neutral choices (such as my choosing to lean slightly to the left now), and *Avoid* worse than such neutral choices.
6. Carr*: Let’s denote the value of *Eat* given our assumption by 1, and the value of normatively neutral actions by 0. How would you rate *Avoid* using this unit of value, under the given assumption?
7. Inti: Hmm, using this unit *Avoid* gets a -1.
8. Carr*: OK great. Hold on to this unit of value as we take the next step: now assume that your intuition that animal suffering is negligible when compared to human matters should be rejected. How would you evaluate your options on this assumption, using the same unit?
9. Inti: If this intuition should be rejected, then—according to my remaining intuitions—there’s no difference between human and animal suffering. The totality of my evidence decisively supports treating the badness of the frustration of not eating what I crave as remaining stable across my normative hypotheses. So, to answer your question: *Avoid* still gets a -1 but *Eat* would get a -6.
10. Carr*: I see! Now please specify your credal distribution among these hypothetical functions, alongside any other function whose expected value maximization under nonnormative uncertainty would possibly cohere with the right normative view, from your epistemic perspective. (Any such alternative hypothetical function must be constructed using the same unit of value and cannot be *equivalent* to any of the

other hypothetical functions, in the sense of having the same practical implications in every possible situation of nonnormative uncertainty.)

11. Inti: I would distribute my credence equally and exclusively among the two functions that I mentioned. This is, to the best of my estimates, what my evidence calls for.
12. Carr*: You know what this implies, don't you?
13. Inti: Yes. Take this tempting fish away from me!!!

The justifiability of each of Inti's deliberative steps ultimately depends on her intuitions (and the rest of her evidence).¹² It does not matter, for my argument, how (un)common epistemic states with intuitions that render such a deliberative route justifiable are. The worry I need to address (in order to defend the implementability of Carr's proposal in such cases) is that *no* specification of Inti's case could render her deliberation justifiable.

Inti's deliberation up to step 5 seems pretty safe from this worry. There is nothing wrong (at least under some specifications of Inti's case) with evaluating options in ordinal terms under a particular normative assumption. Following Carr, I will assume here that there is nothing wrong, in principle, with the cardinal normative evaluation of options, and this allays the discussed worry concerning step 7. Concerning step 9, remember that—unlike Extani*—what determines the right “exchange rate” between the units of Inti's hypothetical functions is their defining features, which Inti can access directly because they are her own constructs. As long as Inti held fixed the same unit of value in her mind from step 6 onward, and constructed all the hypothetical functions as referring to this unit, step 9 might be justified. The burden of proof lies with anyone who would claim that there is an *inherent* problem here. And the same applies to step 11. Indeed, on some specifications of the case, Inti's evidence would have called for higher credence in one of the functions, or having positive credence in some additional hypothetical functions (I avoided such complications in step 11 for simplicity). But surely there is some set of intuitions that would justify Inti's actual answer.¹³ Lastly, Inti's conclusion relies on the mathematical fact that avoiding

12 This applies also to the agreement between the hypotheses in step 9 (an agreement I do not see as an essential feature of this case). By contrast, Tarsney does not seem committed to the dependence of the relevant significance of such agreement between theories on the agent's evidence (“Intertheoretic Value Comparison”). I believe that by adopting this commitment and modifying Tarsney's approach along the lines of my proposal, the problem that Carr identifies can be avoided (“Normative Uncertainty without Theories,” 759–60).

13 I am ignoring views that necessitate imprecise credences in such cases. They deserve a separate discussion.

the fish has a higher expected value $[(0.5 \times -1) + (0.5 \times -1) = -1]$ than eating it $[(0.5 \times 1) + (0.5 \times -6) = -2.5]$, given Inti's credal distribution.

If there is any problem with maximizing expected value in such a case, it is not the (justificatory) problem of IVC. Inti's value comparisons across the normative hypotheses are trivially justified because she justifiably constructs them as referring to the same unit of value. Inti constructs each hypothesis on the basis of one internally consistent subset of her relevant intuitive judgments. I am not trying to argue that merely starting out with indecisive normative intuitions guarantees the justifiability of such construction, or of distributing credence solely among normative hypotheses that share the same unit of value. But the fact that the source of Inti's normative uncertainty is her indecisive normative intuitions renders the justifiability of her credal distribution much more plausible than that of any credal distribution that would allow Extani* to implement Carr's proposal.

I stress that the mere fact that Inti does not have *theories* (as such) in mind does not play an essential role here. To see this, consider the following variation on Inti's case:

Inti*'s case is identical to Inti's, except that she conceives of each of her hypothetical functions as representing a normative theory or a *family* of normative theories that share common features.

By comparing values across hypothetical functions, Inti* would be *ipso facto* comparing values across the associated (families of) normative theories. And these IVCs would be trivially justified, just like Inti's.

3. CONCLUSION

Regardless of whether the agent's normative uncertainty is about *theories* as such, the justificatory problem of IVC threatens the justifiability of maximizing expected value under normative uncertainty. However, I have argued that this justificatory problem can be solved in some cases of indecisive normative intuitions, wherein the agent constructs the relevant normative hypotheses as referring to the same unit of value.

On the one hand, my argument helps Carr by allaying the worry that her proposal could never be implemented justifiably. On the other hand, my argument raises the suspicion that implementing Carr's proposal requires the same type of epistemic state in which explicit IVC (value comparison across normative theories as such) can be justified (as in Inti*'s case), which threatens some of the significance of Carr's proposal. (One natural way to remove this suspicion

would be to show that Carr's proposal could be implemented in cases wherein explicit IVC is *necessarily* unjustified. Carr does not show this.)

But even if this suspicion turns out to be right, we should still acknowledge the fecundity of Carr's argument. First, normatively uncertain agents who do not have normative *theories* in mind deserve our attention too. Second, Carr highlights a stage that is *necessary* for any justifiable procedure of maximizing expected value under normative uncertainty: reaching a justifiable credal distribution among candidate normative functions that share the same unit of value. Proponents of (explicit) IVC must accept the necessity of this stage and defend the possibility of reaching it. Third, Carr's argument can help *opponents* of IVC realize that when this stage is reached, value comparison across the functions is unproblematic.

Future research should investigate whether the gap between proponents and opponents of IVC may be bridged further by attending to the relevant differences that I identified between Extani*'s and Inti*'s types of normative uncertainty. Perhaps the proponents are correct only with respect to some cases wherein the uncertainty stems from the agent's indecisive normative intuitions, or wherein she constructs the normative hypotheses by reference to the same unit of value.

In sum, the combination of Carr's paper and mine helps to illuminate the conditions for maximizing expected value under normative uncertainty without unjustified value comparison.¹⁴

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