

## Gibbard 1990, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*

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“An assertion changes the context by adding the propositional content of the assertion to the common ground.”

– Stalnaker, *Context*

“Conversation... is far more than a carrier of information. In talk we work out not only what to believe about things and events and people, but how to live.”

– Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*

I want to ask two questions: (1) What exactly is Gibbard’s insight, and (2) *how* insightful (& inclusive) is it?

Note the importance of understanding conversation and communication (whether or not you liked the “linguistic turn”).

Phil of language, Phil of science, (social) epistemology, decision/game theory, political philosophy/ethics.

→ Linguistics, law, economics, political science.

**Proposal:** Gibbard’s insight is that the main research paradigm for understanding conversation & communication is *importantly incomplete*.

I want to suggest it gets high marks wrt both (1) and (2).

Think of how much of your life you spend talking!

### I. Inquiry & Deliberation

Conversation 1 (C1): Alice and Andrew are talking about whether the Patriots will get suspended from the playoffs for Deflategate. She points out that there was clearly cheating involved, and the League will be angry about the bad publicity that ensued so will want to crack down. Andrew counters that if they become too strict on their teams for these sorts of infractions it could end up hurting their bottom line, so they won’t take any substantive action.

Conversation 2 (C2): Betty and Bill are talking about whether the Patriots *should* get suspended from the playoffs for Deflategate. Betty points out that the League is in effect a public figure/societal role-model, so they have a duty to enforce norms of good and honest conduct. Bill counters that the League is first and foremost a business, and since being overly strict on teams will hurt their bottom line, they shouldn’t take any substantive action.

#### *I.i. Inquiry*

Semantics and pragmatics: the primary phenomena to be explained is *how* we manage to communicate in (e.g.) conversation.

“Let me begin with some truisms about assertions. First, assertions have content: an act of assertion is, among other things, the expression of

a proposition – something that represents the world as being a certain way. Second, assertions are made in a context – a situation that includes a speaker with certain beliefs and intentions, and some people with their own beliefs and intentions to whom the assertion is addressed... [Finally], acts of assertion affect, and are intended to affect, the context, in particular the attitudes of the participants of the situation; how the assertion affects the context will depend on its content.”

Stalnaker, “Assertion”

“The common ground is an information state that we represent with the set of possible worlds (the context set) that is compatible with the information. The rough idea is that the information is the presumed common background knowledge shared by the participants in a conversation (or perhaps more generally the participants in some cooperative activity). This body of information plays two roles: first, it provides a resource that speakers may exploit in determining how to say what they want to say; second, it identifies the possibilities between which the participants aim to distinguish in their speech, and so provides a resource for explanation of speech acts in terms of the way the act is intended to change the context.”

Stalnaker, *Context*: 36

Sketch of what we’re doing in speech acts. Assertions; accommodating, questioning, etc. The primary thing this picture provides is a way of understanding how we *transfer and refine information* socially. The context set is, primarily a set of possibilities for the way the world might be which we are trying to narrow down. This model handles C1 quite well; not so clear wrt C2.

Continuum between casual conversations (like C1) to institutionalized ones (like scientific inquiry: publication; conferences).

But the Wittgensteinian was right about this much: there’s *much more* to language than the transfer of information! This is where Gibbard comes in.

### *I.ii. Deliberation*

Gibbard: transferring information is only *one* aspect of what we do when we converse.

“Why ponder our lives? At one extreme, the question is not a live one. We are a pondering species – and not each by himself; we are conversants... Sometimes we discuss earnestly, and in any case we banter and tease, quarrel and sulk. We gossip and tell stories, with verve if we can. Do these things engage us because they have point? Are they ways of working matters through with each other, or playing them through?” (3)

What’s the point of conversations like C2? (Why do Nathaniel and I tease each other about grounding?) Is that just *filler*, or does such conversation serve an adaptive purpose in our lives?

“The !Kung criticize each other, they gossip, they make oblique hints; they tell about events, about comings and goings, and about past hunts. They plan their hunts, and the successful hunter may consult on the proper distribution of his kill. Occasionally they quarrel, and frequently they talk about gifts and their suitability.”

There’s a way of reading this non-offensively: just take a culture that is *radically different* from ours in so many ways, and note how *similar* they still are! The drive to talk through how to live is not cultural – it is in human nature.

“Conversation... is far more than a carrier of information. In talk we work out not only what to believe about things and events and people, but how to live. We work out how to feel about things in our lives and the lives of others.” (3)

Gibbard’s goal is to understand why and how this could be. What is going on in C2 (and how?), and what purpose does it serve?

A parallel: Just as the analysis of inquiry draws casual conversation and scientific inquiry as two ends of a continuum, likewise for the analysis of deliberation:

My puzzle, then, is about Socrates, but it is also about the !Kung. I ask about moral philosophy, but also about everyday, non-philosophic life and thought and talk. The two kinds of talk are not the same, but one grows out of the other. As part of a human way of living, we think and discuss what it makes sense to do, and how it makes sense to feel about things. This thought and talk nudge us toward refinement. Wise choices and apt feelings figure in talk at both extremes: in refined, self-conscious philosophizing and in everyday banter and quarrel. I want to know what is at stake in normative talk of both kinds." (5-6)

**Gibbard's Claim:** C1 is importantly different from C2.

*Theoretical:* Hume's Law; Moore's Open Question; Mackie's Queerness; Enoch's just-too-different intuition.

*Mundane:* It's hard to view C2 as *simply* a transfer of information, analogous to C1 but with a slightly different subject matter.

Basic Picture: What's missing from a purely information-transference understanding of C2 is the element of *endorsement* that goes along with the claims made. So what's going on in C2? – "Cryptically put, my answer is this: to call something rational is to express one's acceptance of norms that permit it." (7)

Supplement: Suppose you think the primary phenomenon to be explained wrt normativity is the role normative thought and talk plays in our lives – how it governs deliberation and decision, motivation and planning and endorsement.

If so, *why go any further?* Once we've worked out what norms are, what it is to accept and convey and deliberate with them, and how they motivate us, what is left to be explained?

"Normative talk is part of nature, but it does not describe nature. In particular, a person who calls something rational or irrational is not describing his own state of mind; he is expressing it. To call something rational is not to attribute some particular property to that thing – not even the property of being permitted by accepted norms. The analysis is not directly of what it is for something to *be* rational, but of what it is for someone to *judge* that something is rational. We explain the term by saying what state of mind it expresses." (7-8)

One of Gibbard's primary goals is to unify the manifest and scientific images of our normative lives:

"If we try to paint normative life as part of nature, crucial parts keep looking off shape. Reasons in the picture look not quite like genuine reasons [cf. your favorite reductive analysis!]. Meanings are hardly recognizable." (23)

Casual cajoling and debating falls on one end; political (!) or legal debates, as well as moral philosophy falls on the other.

This insight – what I'm suggesting is the *core* insight of Gibbard's – is, I propose, *neutral* on whether you accept his particular metaethical account. You could supply the motivational tugs via expressivism, or universally had desires, or by intrinsically motivational Platonic properties. The point is that a Stalnakerian model of normative conversations is, at best, incomplete.

(Q: But how controversial is the tie to motivation?)

*This* is where the distinctively expressivist picture comes in.

The "expressivist flip."

"We experience our lives in normative terms, in terms of things it makes sense to do, to think, and to feel. The analysis joins this experience to the detached, scientific perspective. It tells what we can see ourselves as doing as we engage in normative inquiry and discussion." (8)

So *if* we accept that the phenomena to be explained are what Gibbard says they are, then we have a way of reconciling this tension. That's the distinctive motivation toward *expressivism*, given the basic insight about conversation and deliberation.

*I.iii. Questions for discussion:*

- 1) Do you agree with the "basic insight" of dividing conversation and communication into two distinct spheres? If so, how separable is it from Gibbard's substantive metaethical theses? If we *don't* accept the expressivist analysis, is the claim of a "divide" really that tenable, or should we just subsume normative talk to the Stalnakerian model?
- 2) Do people accept Gibbard's claims about what the "phenomena to be explained" are? If we explain the phenomenological, social, psychological dynamics of normative judgments, will we have explained all that needs explanation?
- 3) Gibbard emphasizes that he wants this to be a **vindication** rather than a **debunking** of normative thought and talk:

"None of this leaves normative language defective or second-rate. The analysis explains why we need normative language, and as it takes shape, it ascribes to rationality many of the features on which theories of normative fact insist... Normative discussion is much like factual discussion, I shall be claiming, and just as indispensable." (8)

"Above all, I hope, the analysis will help us understand why it matters which acts and feelings are rational. Deciding what sorts of things are rational is deciding what norms to accept in various realms. The point of the book is to ask what this involves... The eventual goal is to address normative questions with a better sense of what addressing them consists in." (9)

Is Gibbard right?

**Pros:** (i) Just like I care what you believe, I care what norms you accept. I especially care about what you *do* (or are disposed to do). Plausibly, this gets at the gist of what Betty and Bill are after in their discussion (C2).

(ii) The analysis of inquiry does not trivialize either science or casual conversation – both have their point. Why should the analysis of deliberation trivialize casual debate or moral philosophy?

**Cons:** (i) As Gibbard dances around later, on the resulting view, why is talk about what it “makes sense” to do anything more than a rhetorical bludgeon? Can a clear-eyed expressivist still give the same importance to her moral convictions, when it turns out that they are (in some sense) *merely* convictions?

(ii) Maybe this saves regular deliberation, which is tied to action. But something as fringe from action as moral philosophy may get the short end of the stick – it begins to look more like a group therapy session than a serious inquiry!

## II. Into the Details

Why wouldn't a descriptive account be better? Open-question-style argument: any such account will miss the aspect of *endorsement* tied up with normative judgments. It will make sense to ask, “Yes, I see that this action meets such-and-such conditions, but is that what *makes sense* to do?”

Hume-Ramsey theory: given the degree of controversy, this can't be explicating the *meaning* of the term 'rational'. E.g. Octavia and one's future happiness. (11-12)

“Proposal to disarm”? [??]. Problem: instrumental rationality is *not* unproblematic! Prisoner's Dilemma and Allais Paradox.

Full information analyses: Brandt and cognitive psychotherapy.

This misses the *endorsement!* Usually we expect to endorse what reflection and information will lead us want. But to put reflection at the bottom of the analysis is to confuse a good correlate of the phenomenon with the phenomenon itself.

[Time permitting!]

Why couldn't an account do both? Normative terms/concepts have genuine application conditions (they describe genuine properties), but they have a conventionally encoded force, which signals endorsement? “Ecumenical Expressivism.”

**Q:** Semantic externalism?

N.b. rationality vs. advisability.