

## Comments on Williamson’s Good as Usual

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**Punch line:** Even if Williamson is right that normative discourse often expresses mind-independent truths, many of which we know (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 4), realism is *practically insufficient*. Knowledge of what we ought to do, factually construed, does not settle what to do.

- **Structure:** (§1) summarize Williamson’s pertinent commitments; (§2) outline his reply to Street’s criticism of Cornell realists; (§3) press a “new open question” challenge; (§4) sketch the best replies on Williamson’s behalf and why they are inadequate; (§5) suggest that normative knowledge may be neither *necessary nor sufficient* for settling deliberation.

### Overview of the Dialectic

Section	Move	Key Upshot
§1. Williamson’s View	Anti-exceptionalist, intensionalist realism: normative properties are cheap; robust realism falls out of standard metaphysics.	Agreed! Realism is cheap. But it is not all self-identified realists have wanted. The elusive extra is what makes normative realism vexed (Mackie 1977, Ch. 1).
§2. Williamson on Street	Street’s scenario involving evaluative communities does not show that both groups fail to express mind-independent truths. Moreover, one community’s predicates may be more natural.	Correct as far as it goes. But the underlying problem (in my view) is not about truth or reference, but action.
§3. The New Open Question	For any kind of ought (moral, epistemic, etc.), there is an ought <sup>Twin</sup> such that the deliberative question remains: whether to do what we ought or ought <sup>Twin</sup> to do.	Normative knowledge is not sufficient for settling what to do. Even if we ought to $\Phi$ , we ought <sup>Twin</sup> $\neg\Phi$ . Now we must decide whether to do we ought or ought <sup>Twin</sup> .
§4. Objections & Replies	Four potential rejoinders: (a) motivation externalism, (b) naturalness, (c) sparse properties, (d) constitutive identity. All fail.	(a) Conflates deliberation with motivation. (b) Iterates the problem. (c) Leaves the question of whether to consult normative properties at all. (d) Iterates the problem again.
§5. Necessity?	Normative knowledge may not even be necessary for settling deliberation: “one thought too many” and the “moral fetishist.” This raises the question: <i>who cares whether normative realism is true?</i>	Only non-cognitivists who identify what ought I do with what to do, <i>the latter more basic</i> , avoid the problem. Settling what to do settles deliberation because it ends in intention, and we can only do one thing – that is, $\Phi$ ing at t precludes $\neg\Phi$ ing.

## §1. Williamson’s View

Williamson argues for a “realist, externalist, anti-sceptical, anti-reductive, and anti-exceptionalist” account of value (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. xiv) according to which “in normative discourse, we often express mind-independent truths, many of which we know” (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 4).

One might say that, for Williamson, non-skeptical “robust realism” about the normative is cheap (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 57). It naturally falls out of his metaphysical and epistemic framework, affording “a rather cheap way of establishing realism about value” (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 20).

With this much, I actually agree (!). Realism (perhaps even “robust” realism, depending on exactly what we mean by “robust”) is cheap, or as cheap as realism about other high-level properties. But realism, in Williamson’s sense, is not all that self-identified realists have wanted.

- *Gibbard*: “In our reasoning to decisions, we must think...as if there were properties that include, in some queer way, this conclusive to-be-doneness (2003, 5).”<sup>1</sup>

## §2. Williamson on Street

Williamson comes closest to addressing what else realists have wanted in his criticism of Street’s discussion of Cornell Realists, like Boyd. Street’s argument (Cf. Hare, *Sorting Out Ethics*, 1997, p. 30) is that alternative communities’ evaluative terms could have designated other properties, and there is “no standard independent of all of our and their evaluative attitudes determining whose sense of the word ‘good’ is right or better” (“Darwinian Dilemma,” 2006, pp. 138–39). In response, Williamson makes all the right points. He rhetorically asks: “How is lack of disagreement in Street’s scenario supposed to show that the two groups are not both expressing mind-independent evaluative truths?” (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 22). In his paper that Street targets, Boyd himself notes that “the subject matter of moral inquiry in each of the relevant communities would be theory-and-belief-independent in the sense relevant to the dispute between realists and social constructivists” (“How to Be a Moral Realist,” 1988, p. 226). All that is mind-dependent is what is always mind-dependent: what we happen to pick out with words.

Williamson adds that the targeted views do “not require that N and N\* be equally natural or joint-carving; they only need to be natural or joint-carving enough to be picked out by the evaluative attitudes prevailing in the respective contexts. The two groups may still disagree over whose distinction is the more natural or joint-carving” (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 22). So, the situation just looks like the case of two communities of inquirers who treat different predicates as primitive. Properties are cheap—at least, given Williamson’s intensionalism. The point of inquiry is not just to speak truly in a language, but to do so in the most (or a very) natural one.

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<sup>1</sup> I also agree with Williamson’s insistence that metaphysical issues, like the problem of universals, cannot be responsibly bracketed, so remarks like Enoch’s (*Taking Morality Seriously*, 2011) that realists can afford “metaphysical nonchalance” about the platonism-nominalism debate are off base.

### §3. Realism and Deliberation

So far so good. But unlike the scientific case, conclusions about what is good, what we should do, what is rational, and so on ideally issue in *action* (as Williamson himself emphasizes (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 74)). If killing the one to save the five (in some situation) is in the extension of our normative predicate, ‘N’, and saving the one and letting the five die is in the extension of normative<sup>Twin</sup> predicate, ‘N\*’, then the two communities -- who may be omnipotent about both properties -- still have a disagreement in action. For practical purposes, they might as well just disagree over whether they ought to kill the one! The problem of *what to do* is the same.

**Normative Agreement with Practical Disagreement:** For any normative belief, there is a “transposition” of it into a true proposition about some normative<sup>Twin</sup> properties. Had we held the transposed belief, our beliefs may have been true (even knowledge). But we would have done the wrong (but not wrong<sup>Twin</sup>!) thing, insofar as we were rational<sup>Twin</sup>. The prospect of having normative<sup>Twin</sup> knowledge would be *practically* as bad as that of having false normative beliefs.

**Widening the Open Question.** Williamson notes the practical conflict between communities (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 22), but does not seem to see its deliberative significance. For suppose that we *had both normative and normative<sup>Twin</sup> knowledge*, as a visitor to Horgan and Timmons’ Moral Twin Earth might. Now consider: whether to consult the former or the latter in deciding what to do? This problem, while cognate to Street’s (and Hare’s), does not depend on natural language semantics—or, it seems (see below), even on metaphysics. Just as Hume and Moore argued that there is a gap between what is ‘F’ for any descriptive predicate ‘F’ and what is good, there is a gap between what we *ought* to do and what *to do*, in any sense of ‘ought’ you like (and similarly for what we have most reason to do, what is good to do, what is rational to do, etc.), construed as factual claims. Even if we ought to kill the one to save the five, there is another property—call it ought<sup>Twin</sup> (after Horgan and Timmons’ “Moral Twin Earth” (1991))—according to which we ought<sup>Twin</sup> not. The “central deliberative question” (Risberg, “Ethics and the Question of What to Do,” 2023) remains open: whether to do what we ought, or ought<sup>Twin</sup>, to do. (I draw here on the arguments in Clarke-Doane, *Morality and Mathematics*, 2020/4, Ch. 6.).

**The irrelevance of semantics.** It is worth emphasizing that the argument does not turn on natural language semantics, unlike its cousins. Even if we all express the same property (operator value) with “ought”—even if some form of “reference magnetism” ensures this—the fact that we pick out a given property (value) rather another with “ought” is neither here nor there for the question of whether to kill the one. An omniscient semanticist could not resolve our practical dilemma by determining what we happen to pick out with words (Clarke-Doane 2020, §6.4–6.5)!

#### Clarification:

By stipulation, we really ought to kill the one (in whatever sense of ‘ought’ you like, including “all things considered”)! We may also grant that we have most reason to, that it would be rational, good, the thing to do, and so on for any other normative terms in the network. Nor is there any doubt that we *ought* to regulate our behavior by consulting what we ought to do, rather than what we ought<sup>Twin</sup> to do. But, then, we also ought<sup>Twin</sup> to consult what we ought<sup>Twin</sup> to do!

**Upshot:** Williamson’s realism, while checking all the boxes, is practically insufficient. This is not a failure of his view per se. It is a limitation of any realist – or even cognitivist – theory.

- *Enoch*: “[N]ormative facts are “for...deliberating and deciding what to do” (*Taking Morality Seriously*, p. 51) (Cf. H. Smith 2018; Nagel 1970, p. 3; Parfit 2011, p. 33; Scanlon 1998, p. 1; Korsgaard 2009, p. 81).

#### §4. Objections and Replies

I have argued that even if Street’s (Hare’s) argument does not show that Cornell realism, or Williamson’s “robust” realism, implies anti-realism, there is an argument in the neighborhood that knowledge of Williamson’s—or any cognitivist’s—normative facts would not do the primary thing they are supposed to do—settle what to do. (They tell us what we ought to do. But ought<sup>Twin</sup> facts tell us what we ought<sup>Twin</sup> to do. Now what to do?) How may Williamson respond?

Objection	Core Idea	Why It Fails
<b>(a) Motivation Externalism</b>	One can know one ought to X without being motivated to X.	Misidentifies the target. The objection is not about motivation ( <i>a fortiori</i> reasons), but deliberation. Our deliberation as to whether to kill the one is not settled by knowledge that we ought to. If we consult ought <sup>Twin</sup> , we will not kill if we are rational <sup>Twin</sup> .
<b>(b) Naturalness / Joint-Carving</b>	Supplement realism with the thesis that normative properties are most natural (van Roojen 2006, Enoch & McPherson 2017).	Dilemma: either naturalness is non-normative or normative. If non-normative, then it is irrelevant to what to do (Eklund 2017: “tasty” example). If normative, then we iterate. Normative properties are natural, normative <sup>Twin</sup> properties are natural <sup>Twin</sup> . Now: whether to consult natural or natural <sup>Twin</sup> properties? (Cf. Dasgupta 2018.)
<b>(c) Sparse Properties</b>	Give up Williamson’s commitment to plenitudinous properties: there are no normative <sup>Twin</sup> properties (contra Williamson 2025, p. 8).	Awkward. This says properties are sparse (Armstrong 1989) yet include normative ones. Even so, the question remains whether to regulate our behavior by consulting them. “For any fact, there is a question of what to do about it” (Blackburn 1998, p. 70).
<b>(d) Constitutive Identity</b>	There is no gap. Normative knowledge settles what to do <i>constitutively</i> , not as a further step. The deliberative question <i>just is</i> the normative question.	Dilemma for “settles.” If “settling” is a cognitive/factual relation, iterate: there is a settling <sup>Twin</sup> relation, and the question arises whether to settle or settle <sup>Twin</sup> . If “settles” is non-cognitive — expressing a practical commitment rather

		than stating a fact — iteration stops, but at the cost of conceding the practical question is not factual.
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Regress (bridge principles/criterion of agency):</b>  <math>K(\text{we ought } \Phi) \rightarrow \text{rationally required}(\text{Intend } \Phi)</math> [<i>Agency</i>]  But <math>K(\text{we ought}^{\text{Twin}} \neg\Phi) \rightarrow \text{rationally}^{\text{Twin}} \text{ required}(\text{Intend } \neg\Phi)</math> [<i>Agency</i><sup>Twin</sup>]</p>		

**Objection (a): Motivation Externalism.** Externalists hold that one can know (be fully aware, etc.) that they ought to X without being even defeasibly motivated to X. Plausible or not, this view is open to Williamson. But the rejoinder misunderstands the objection. It is not about motivation (a fortiori reasons), but *deliberation*. Our deliberation as to whether to kill the one to save the five is not settled by knowledge that we ought to. There is another property according to which we ought—or ought<sup>Twin</sup> not—kill the one. So, the question of what to do remains open: whether to “follow”, or consult, what we ought or ought<sup>Twin</sup> to do in deciding what to do?

**Objection (b): Naturalness.** Perhaps realism should be supplemented with the view that normative properties are most natural, as Williamson suggests it might (van Roojen, “Knowing Enough to Disagree,” 2006; Enoch and McPherson, “What Do You Mean ‘This Isn’t the Question’?”, 2017). But this would not help. Either naturalness—or the expression “natural” (Williamson, *Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 11)—is normative or not. If it is not, then the claim that normative properties are natural is neither here nor there from the standpoint of what to do. (At most, it is a metasemantic point about how our word “ought” works.) As Eklund puts it (using “elite” instead of “natural”): consider two communities with different aesthetic predicates—for example, different non-coextensive predicates “tasty.” Suppose one community’s “tasty” picks out a more metaphysically elite property (e.g., because there is a chemical element such that they like food containing it). “To take this to be relevant to which community...has the aesthetically better taste would clearly be unwarranted” (*Choosing Normative Concepts*, 2017, p. 18). However, if naturalness *is* normative, then we are back to square one (Dasgupta, “Realism and the Absence of Value,” 2018). Normative properties are natural, while normative<sup>Twin</sup> properties are natural<sup>Twin</sup>. Shall we regulate our behavior by consulting natural or natural<sup>Twin</sup> properties?

**Objection (c): Sparse properties.** Maybe Williamson could jettison his view that properties and states-of-affairs are “plentitudinous,” so that “any one-place normative predicate modally corresponds to a property” (*Good as Usual*, 2025, p. 8). This would be an awkward position for the reasons noted by Eklund. It would say that properties are sparse (Armstrong 1989) but include normative ones. But even if there were only normative properties (and no twin properties), the question would remain whether to regulate our behavior by consulting them. Perhaps we shall regulate our behavior by consulting only “descriptive” properties (see §5)!

- *Blackburn*: “For any fact, there is a question of what to do about it” (*Ruling Passions*, 1998, p. 70).

**Objection (d): Constitutive Identity.** Perhaps the most fundamental response is to deny that there *is* a gap between the normative question and the deliberative question. On this view, knowing what one ought to do *constitutively settles* what to do. The deliberative question “whether to  $\Phi$ ” just *is* the factual question “whether we ought to  $\Phi$ .” There is no residual “whether to”. This objection does not try to *answer* the deliberative question (by citing

motivation, naturalness, or sparse properties) but to *dissolve* it. However, it invites a dilemma. The claim that normative knowledge "settles" what to do is itself either a cognitive claim — a factual claim about a settling relation between normative knowledge and practical resolution — or it is not. If it *is* cognitive, then the argument iterates. There is a settling<sup>Twin</sup> relation, and the question arises whether to settle or settle<sup>Twin</sup>. If, on the other hand, "settles" is understood *non-cognitively* — as expressing a practical commitment rather than stating a fact — then the iteration stops. But it stops only at the cost of conceding the central point: what closes the deliberative question is not a further piece of normative knowledge but something non-cognitive — an attitude, a commitment, an intention. This is just the non-cognitivist's point (see §5).

### §5. Who Cares if Normative Realism is True?

I have argued that, while Williamson is right that normative realism is true – even cheap – the resulting “robust realism” is unsatisfying. It fails to vindicate normative knowledge’s deliberative sufficiency. We can know the normative facts while still wondering what to do—and not just in the sense that we threaten to be weak in will or confused. We can wonder whether to regulate our behavior by consulting the properties we actually pick out with normative language.

I have left open whether knowledge of the normative facts is at least *necessary* for settling what to do. If it were, then the question of realism would still have practical interest. But while I cannot adequately address that question here, it does not appear to be. Many realists in effect advocate *not* regulating our behavior by consulting normative properties. To settle whether to help a drowning child, we need to know that he is drowning, that we are able to help, that he will die if we do not, and so forth. We do not also need to know that it would be good to help. The view that we need to check the distribution of the normative properties in order to settle what to do attributes to us “one thought too many” (Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality,” 1981, p. 18). It makes us “moral fetishists,” whom even realists may repudiate (Smith, *The Moral Problem*, 1994, p. 71). As McGrath puts it, maybe “practical deliberation takes as input only the underlying reasons, and issues as output...what to do” (“Starry, Starry ‘Right,’” 2025, p. 496) with normative theories reduced to “*explaining* why the things to do are the things to do” (2025, p. 496, my emphasis). In that case, normative theory is as practical as psychological theory.

**Summary:** I have argued that knowledge of the normative facts is not sufficient, and perhaps not even necessary, for settling deliberation. The argument assumed cognitivism, not realism. Only non-cognitivists who identify the question of “what ought I do” with that of “what to do,” with the latter explanatorily primary, avoid the problem. Settling what to do settles deliberation, they may point out, because it ends in intention (or an intimately related attitude (see Clarke-Doane, *Morality and Mathematics*, 2020/4, Ch. 6), and we can only do one thing in a context – i.e.,  $\Phi$ ing at  $t$  precludes  $\neg\Phi$ ing to  $t$ . Williamson’s book makes admirably vivid that, on the one hand, normative realism is defensible, even “cheap”, but, on the other hand, this may not matter.

- *Gibbard*: “Suppose...someone...were a ‘practical realist’, to decide what now to do...is to conclude that one of the acts open to me has a special properties.... [T]hey...accept that knowing what I ought to do...leaves no further question of what to do....Why....further one non-natural property and oppose another (2003, 5)?”

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