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CRITICAL NOTICE

Matti Eklund, *Choosing Normative Concepts*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ix + 219 pp.

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What does it take to be a realist about the normative? A standard response is that if you are a realist about the normative, you endorse at least the following two claims: normative judgements are beliefs about normative facts, and there are normative facts. These two claims are meant to exclude traditional forms of non-cognitivism and error theory. Sometimes a third claim about mind-independence is also taken to be definitive of realism; a claim to the effect that normative facts are not constituted by our, or anyone else's, attitudes. This claim is meant to exclude traditional forms of relativism and constructivism.

In his ground-breaking book, Matti Eklund suggests that the three claims, or some variants thereof, do not satisfy 'ardent realists', who want 'reality to undergird some ways of valuing over others' (p. 5), since it seems possible to imagine a community of speakers who use alternative normative concepts in their deliberations and normative judgements about what to do, and who seek to act accordingly. Ardent realists maintain that these speakers are somehow objectively out of sync with normative reality. To get clearer on this putative possibility, and what ardent realists should think about it, consider the following scenario, which Eklund calls '*Alternative*':

There is a linguistic community speaking a language much like English, except for the following differences (and whatever differences are directly entailed). While their words 'good', 'right', and 'ought' are associated with the same normative roles as our words 'good', 'right', and 'ought', their words aren't coextensive with our 'good', 'right', and 'ought'. So even if they are exactly right about what is 'good' and 'right' and what 'ought' to be done, in their sense, and they seek to promote and to do what is 'good' and 'right' and what 'ought' to be done in their sense, they do not seek to promote what is good and right and what ought to be done. (p. 18)

This scenario can be elaborated in ways that make the difference between our normative concepts and the concepts used in the alternative linguistic community either radical or moderate. To get the radical version of *Alternative* in focus, we can suppose that members of the envisaged linguistic community are paradigmatic *bad guys*, who do bad things and are motivated by malicious desires (p. 1). In addition to being bad, these guys are also obstinate: when we protest that what they do is not good or right, or not what ought to be done, they quite agree, but add that what they do is good* and right* and what ought* to be done, and that we often fail to do what is good* and right* and what ought* to be done (pp. 5–6).

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Eklund maintains that those among us who are ardent realists will want to say that we are somehow warranted in using our normative concepts, while the bad guys are not in using theirs. But what makes us thus warranted? Eklund describes this query as a 'novel kind of sceptical challenge concerning the normative' (p. 22). Indeed, even stating the problem is challenging, as we quickly face inexpressibility problems (p. 6, 23): when we claim that we are warranted in using our normative concepts, the bad guys may agree and retort that they are warranted* in using theirs; when we claim that our concepts better 'limn the normative structure of reality' (p. 22), they may agree and retort that their concepts better* limn the normative* structure of reality; and so on and so forth. In their deliberation and action, they give priority to what is warranted*, better*, and normative* over what is warranted, better, and normative. According to Eklund, this does not mean that there is no question here to be asked, but only that we do not, and perhaps cannot, possess the concepts or terms required to render it effable.

Eklund thinks that those who are *Alternative-friendly*, i.e. those who hold that *Alternative* is possible, face the following dilemma: either accept that there are ineffable questions about normativity, or accept a 'deflationary' view of the normative (p. 18). To do the latter is to rest content with the conclusion that while we are concerned with what is good and right, and with what ought to be done, the bad guys are concerned with what is good* and right*, and with what ought* to be done; there is no further debate to be had between us and them concerning who are warranted in their respective uses of concepts.

Ardent realists are unhappy with both the ineffability response and the deflationary view. Perhaps, then, a more promising option for ardent realists is to embrace *Alternative-unfriendliness* and deny that *Alternative* is possible. Indeed, Eklund argues that this is the most promising (or least problematic) option for ardent realists. More specifically, he thinks that they should defend a view of normative predicates as 'referentially normative': their reference is determined by the normative roles they are associated with (p. 10). This makes it impossible for 'right' and 'right*' to differ in reference if they share the same normative role. With this in place, the ardent realist can avoid the dilemma between ineffability and deflationism.

After the initial set-up of the problem and additional qualifications (chs. 1–3), Eklund discusses various closely related questions: (a) how to define normative concepts and normative properties (chs. 4–5); (b) whether normativity is in the world or in our representations (ch. 6); (c) whether one can be against what is 'plainly right' (ch. 7); (d) how the possibility of *Alternative* relates to normative indeterminacy, metaethical quietism, certain objections to non-naturalism, 'creeping' minimalism, essential contestability, and some metaphilosophical issues (ch. 8 and 10); and (e) how to understand 'thick' concepts (ch. 9).

As seen, the book contains an impressive wealth of complex and abstract philosophical ideas. At times the reader may feel the air is a bit thin at the higher levels of abstraction, but this should not deter him or her. There is much to learn from a close (but slow) reading of this book. New philosophical challenges are introduced – all worthy of serious consideration – and Eklund does a great job at judicially assessing different possible solutions without settling for any one in particular.

Since the book is so rich in content and complexity, there is no way we can do justice to it in this short review. What we would like to do is make some critical remarks on the way Eklund sets up the problem for the ardent realist. More specifically, we want to explore the first horn of Eklund's dilemma for the alternative-friendly realist, and

question the rationale of the ardent realist's ardency: why is it problematic for realists to be non-ardently complacent and just say that 'sure, members of the alternative community speak truly when they say that what they do is right* and that they are good* people, but they are acting wrongly and they are bad, and that is what matters'?

Whether this complacent attitude is justified depends on how 'normative role' is spelled out. On the most minimal interpretation, there is only one positive normative role, namely positive motivational role. For a concept to play this role is just for it to be such that when one judges that an action falls under this concept, then one is motivated to perform it. If this minimal notion of normative role is assumed, it seems clear that scenarios like *Alternative* are possible. Perhaps the alternative community consists of hedonistic amorality who are motivated in their actions only by what they take to promote their own pleasure. So the minimally normative concept for them is the concept of promoting one's own pleasure, and ours is the concept of rightness. Presumably, the ardent realists would say that they are missing out on something important: to see actions as right or wrong. It might be thought that the initial set-up rules out this reading of *Alternative*, since the alternative community is supposed to seek what is right*. But this is just because Eklund uses the term 'right*' to pick out the concept that plays the normative role in their lives; this predicate suggests that they use a rightness concept, since it is close to being a homonym of 'right'. Eklund could have used the term 'thgir' (which he does use in a different context later on), and we would not have been automatically led to assume that they must be using a rightness concept.

Now, Eklund makes clear later on (a bit too late, we think) that the normative role has to be 'conventionally or semantically associated' with the predicate, which means that it is in virtue of being associated with a normative role that the predicate is normative (p. 46). This rules out the minimal reading of 'normative role', for actual motivational role is only *contingently* associated with the predicates 'right' and 'promotes one's own pleasure'. After all, a severely depressed person is not moved to perform the act she thinks is right. Similarly, an ascetic is not moved to promote her own pleasure. Flat-footed motivational internalists would of course deny the first claim, but realists typically have no truck with their view.

What ardent realists need to say is that it is in virtue of a much narrower normative role – the *rightness* role – that a predicate is associated with, that it picks out a rightness concept. It is then no longer misleading to use 'right*' to express the concept the alternative community is wedded to, since 'right*' is supposed to pick out a rightness concept, and not just any concept that plays a certain role in their actual motivation.

Given this clarification, it is doubtful that we can have radical divergence, as in the case of us versus the bad guys. Why should we think that the bad guys are using a rightness concept when whatever they know is right* is something we know is wrong and whoever they know is good* we know is bad? After all, if the extensions of two predicates differ radically, this is evidence that they express different kinds of concept. If I use 'horse' for horses and you use 'horse*' for spoons, we would not be tempted to think that the predicates express different horse concepts or two different spoon concepts. Indeed, if the extensions differ too much, there is good reason to think that we have a case of *changing the subject*. This is not to say that a subject matter cannot survive more restricted changes in extension. Think of different concepts of fruit: the scientific, according to which tomatoes are fruits, and the ordinary, according to which tomatoes are vegetables. When scientists and folk talk about 'fruits', they seem to be sharing a subject matter even though their concepts differ slightly.

A more specific argument against the possibility of radical divergence is that, unlike the concept expressed by 'shall', which can be used to express any old intention based on any old considerations, the kind of concept expressible by 'right all things considered' seems more restricted (at least for a realist). There are some restrictions on what can intelligibly make an action fall under an all-things-considered rightness concept. For example, if the bad guys correctly judge an action to be right* just because it causes horrible suffering for others until they die, this seems to show that their concept right* is not an all-things-considered rightness concept.

These general observations suggest that if the extensions of 'right' and 'right*' diverge radically, we have a case of changing the subject. This does not rule out *Alternative-friendliness* about cases of limited divergence, which is a possibility that Eklund recognizes. He concedes that nothing he has said 'blocks this strategy' (p. 49). As Eklund acknowledges, one could then think that the 'whole problematic is ... defused' (p. 49), for as he says:

Maybe there are actions such that they are in the extensions of some but not all counterparts of 'right', and in *some* sense there may be no objective fact of the matter about how to act, but so long as these actions are *fairly few and far between* that need not be of great concern. One can then avoid both the idea of a Further Question, apparently ineffable (which rightness concept is it right to use?), and the deflationary consequences of denying that there is such a question. (p. 49, Eklund's emphasis)

Eklund spends surprisingly little time discussing this possibility. He argues briefly that by allowing only for small divergences of extensions one has 'for all important intents and purposes' abandoned *Alternative-friendliness* (p. 49). Eklund's argument for this is that if you are small divergence friendly, you must attach importance to this division of actions: (1) what is right, (2) what is right*, (3) what is both right and right*, i.e., what is *superright*, and (4) what is neither right nor right*. More specifically, you will think there is something important about what is superright: the 'normatively central' question is not what is right, but what is superright. This means the privileged rightness concept is that of superrightness, and regarding this rightness concept, one is alternative-unfriendly for there can't be an alternative community that uses an alternative superrightness concept.

We are not sure we follow this reasoning. Why must one think that superrightness is the normatively privileged concept just because one thinks there can only be small divergences between different rightness concepts? It is not true that we ought to choose a superright action rather than a merely right action, and it is not true that they ought* to choose a superright action rather than a merely right* action. We want to do what is right, and even if we may have reason to try to convince members of the alternative community to do what is superright rather than merely right* – perhaps we maximize happiness that way, and perhaps maximizing happiness is a right-maker – this reason is not grounded in what is superright (or what is a right*-maker). The only sense in which superrightness is important is that the relative size of its extension determines whether we and they are in fact talking about the same subject matter when using 'right' and 'right*' respectively. If the extension of what is superright is small relative to the extension of right and the extension of right*, then it is doubtful that our concept and theirs are both rightness concepts.

We therefore doubt that Eklund has provided a successful argument to the effect that small divergence friendliness collapses into *Alternative*-unfriendliness. One wonders, then, what exactly is problematic about the deflationary response to small divergence versions of *Alternative*. If only small divergences in rightness concepts are possible, and if metanormative inquiry establishes that we have true justified normative beliefs about normative mind-independent facts, realists will consider their mission accomplished. It is not obvious why they should be worried by the possibility of a community of speakers who use slightly different normative concepts than we do.

Perhaps, then, the conclusion to draw from Eklund's *Alternative* scenario is not that it presents normative realists with a novel sceptical challenge, but that ardent realists should temper their metanormative aspirations. In the restricted set of cases where there is only small divergence between our rightness concept and that of another community, realists cannot say that one community 'gets it right' and the other 'gets it wrong'. But since this is not a radical case of good guys versus bad guys, it seems to be something realists can live with.

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Reply to Bykvist and Olson

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Many thanks to Krister Bykvist and Jonas Olson for their thoughtful review of my book *Choosing Normative Concepts*, and for their kind words. In this reply, I focus on one main theme they bring up.

As I present the scenario *Alternative* (p. 18), around which much of my discussion of alternative normative concepts revolves, the scenario concerns a community using concepts with the same *normative roles* as ours but differing in extension. In the book, I leave normative role schematic but gloss the notion in terms of action-guiding and motivation (p. 10). As I mention (pp. 38ff.), doubts can be raised regarding the notion of normative role. But the idea of something like normative role is familiar from the literature. For example, when Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons ('Troubles for New Wave Moral Semantics: The "Open Question Argument" Revived', 1992) describe their Moral Twin Earth thought experiment, they in effect stipulate that our normative terms and the Moral Twin Earthlings' normative terms have the same normative roles. The stipulation of sameness of normative role is crucial in the Moral Twin Earth thought experiment: it is by virtue of the sameness in this regard that we have (or are supposed to have) the intuition that the Moral Twin Earthlings' words must have the same reference as ours. In the setting of the discussion of my book, this stipulation is also important. It is because the possible normative concepts considered have the same normative roles as ours that they are supposed to be clearly relevant to metaethics. I raise questions of this kind: do considerations about what is good and right have the significance we normally attach to