

# Review of Matti Eklund, “Choosing Normative Concepts”

NICHOLAS DRAKE  
Australian National University

Penultimate draft of review published in *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 17 (4), 2020:441-444.

M. Eklund, *Choosing Normative Concepts*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 224 pages. ISBN: 9780198717829 (hardcover).

Matti Eklund’s excellent *Choosing Normative Concepts* is a rich and wide-ranging book. Its central concern is whether what Eklund calls “ardent realism” about normativity can withstand problems that arise when we consider what normative concepts we should use. Eklund characterizes ardent realism as motivated by the view that reality itself values certain ways of valuing and acting. This motivation is illustrated with the familiar example of Bad Guy: Bad Guy does bad things motivated by bad desires, and the ardent realist wants to say that Bad Guy gets something important objectively wrong.

The primary problem Eklund identifies for ardent realism is this. Consider the scenario *Alternative*. There is a linguistic community speaking a language like English. Their words “good,” “right,” and “ought,” etc., thought of in the thinnest possible way, are associated with the same normative roles as ours, but aren’t coextensive with them. Call their concepts “good\*,” “right\*,” etc. If the alternative community is correct about what’s good\* and seek to promote what’s good\* they don’t seek to promote what’s good. Under *Alternative-friendly* views, *Alternative* is possible. In that case, even if the ardent realist is granted everything about normativity she wishes (such as categorical reasons, all-things-considered-oughts, and the objective truth of some atomic normative statements) she faces a dilemma. On one horn of the dilemma, we have a deflationary view instead of ardent realism: There are objectively true normative judgements, but they lack importance. If Bad Guy is a member of the alternative

community, it could be that what he does is not right, but is right\*. The ardent realist then has trouble pressing a complaint against Bad Guy. She can tell him he ought not to do what he does, but he will respond that he knows that, but that he ought\* to do what he does.

This brings us to the other horn of the dilemma. The ardent realist can consider what Eklund calls the *Further Question*: whose normative concepts should be employed, ours or those of the alternative community? The problem the ardent realist faces on this horn is that the question appears to be *ineffable*; it can't be meaningfully expressed. In any discussion of which normative concepts should be used, we will use our normative concepts, framing the question in a way that threatens to trivially settle it in favor of our terms, and the alternative community will use their normative concepts, framing the question in a way that threatens to trivially settle it in favor of their terms. We can expect to determine that *we* use the *right* concepts, but we can expect the alternative community to determine that *they* use the *right\** concepts.

Eklund's primary theses are conditional: Ardent realism can be true only under *Alternative-unfriendly* views, and there are Alternative-unfriendly views only if there are some possible non-defective *referentially normative* predicates. A predicate or concept is referentially normative if its reference is determined by the normative role it is associated with, and it is non-defectively so if it isn't empty or wildly semantically indeterminate or in some other way has only trivial extension.

Chapters 1 and 2 explain the notions of alternative normative concepts and referential normativity, and the problem faced by ardent realism. Chapter 3 gives qualifications to the main claims of the first chapters, and considers objections, the most pressing of which is the *embarrassment of riches* objection, to which I will return. Chapter 4 argues for the *normative role view* of normative concepts, whereby what makes a predicate normative is the normative use semantically associated with it. (Eklund switches between talk of "predicates" and "concepts.") Eklund argues convincingly that the normative role view solves problems faced by the *metaphysical view*, according to which a predicate is normative by virtue of ascribing a normative property, and the *minimalist view*, according to which a predicate is normative if it stands in the right entailment relations to the concept *goodness* or the concept *badness*. An example of these problems is that the metaphysical view has trouble with objectionable thick concepts such as "lewd,"

which pick out behaviour that is not actually good or bad. Under the normative role view, such terms are associated with normative roles and so are normative even though they don't ascribe normative properties.

Chapter 5 discusses normative properties. Eklund does not give a view on what it is for a property to be normative, but gives an informative characterization of normative properties: A property is normative iff it can be ascribed using a non-defective referentially normative predicate. Chapter 6 is on *presentationalism*, the view that there are no normative facts or properties and that normativity resides only in our representations of the world. Eklund argues that presentationalism is a much-overlooked view, one which causes significant problems for a range of theories. Chapter 7 discusses antimoralism, the view of a person who purports to be opposed to morality, and argues convincingly that not only antimoralism, but also antinormativism, are coherent positions. Chapter 8 goes through a list of the connections between the book and other discussions in the literature, including discussions of normative indeterminacy, noncognitivism, normative pragmatism, and the problem of *creeping minimalism* (how to distinguish realism from sophisticated antirealism). There is a particularly interesting discussion of *essential contestability*, the view that normative concepts give rise to disputes that are hard or impossible to settle. Eklund argues against the conception of essential contestability that comes to us from W. B. Gallie, and gives ways to better make sense of the notion. Chapter 9 is on thick normative concepts. Eklund argues against existing accounts of thick concepts, and argues for an account based on Foot's discussion of the concept *rude*. Finally (aside from a brief conclusion), Chapter 10 discusses metaphilosophical issues raised by the book.

Throughout the book Eklund is concerned to explore possibilities and to argue for conditional theses rather than categorical ones. In doing so, he uses the notion of alternative normative concepts to put pressure on a remarkable number of views, including among others the non-naturalist views of Dancy, FitzPatrick, and Enoch, Parfit's objection to naturalism, Scanlon's normative quietism, some forms of naturalism, prominent accounts of essential contestability and thick concepts, Foot's argument against "breakdown theory," Cuneo's argument against epistemic reductionism, and Finlay's view of normative properties. A frequent source of flaws Eklund identifies with various views is the failure to properly distinguish between normative concepts or

predicates and normative properties. Throughout, the discussions are charitable and open to accommodation with opposing views.

The most significant concern of the book is not whether ardent realism is true, but what is necessary for ardent realism to be true. As noted above, Eklund argues that ardent realism requires an Alternative-unfriendly view, and that Alternative-unfriendliness requires that there are some possible non-defective referentially normative predicates. This solution faces what Eklund calls the *embarrassment of riches* objection. If normative role determines reference, there is some possible community with a predicate  $R^*$ , different from our predicate  $R$ , but sufficiently like it in its associated normative role that the predicates are in normative competition. The extension of the term associated with  $R$  is different from the extension of the term associated with  $R^*$ . So, there is a similar problem to that faced by Alternative-friendly theories: “We can state normative justifications for our actions using our terms; Bad Guy can state normative justifications for his actions using his terms” (p. 55). How can we argue that our terms are privileged?

Eklund’s solution to the embarrassment of riches objection is what he calls the *normative sparseness* reply: if there are competing normative roles that can be associated with a predicate, some but not all of these normative roles have normative properties associated with them, and it is natural to think that if there’s normativity in the world only one of “ought” (for example) and its competing predicates is associated with a normative role that is associated with normative properties.

Eklund does not claim that this solution works—his only concern is with what ardent realism needs in order to succeed. It seems to me, though, that Eklund’s argument here is more significant than he thinks. The ardent realist wants more than just one of “ought” and its competing predicates being associated with a normative role associated with normative properties; she wants that *our* “ought” has those associations, not some competing predicate. An even deeper problem is that the justification for normative sparseness will strike many as slight. As Eklund notes, the idea that of each set of competing predicates only one is associated, via normative role, with normative properties is a “speculative metaphysical assumption” (p. 59). It strikes Eklund that it is “natural” to think normative sparseness correct; but for those who do not share this intuition (or

are distrustful of intuitions about metaphysics), ardent realism is undermined by the reliance on this intuition for its justification.

The book is well-argued, engaging, clear and simple in style, and rewards careful study. I highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in metaethics and metanormativity.