

# How to choose normative concepts

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## Abstract

Matti Eklund (2017) has argued that ardent realists face a serious dilemma. Ardent realists believe that there is a mind-independent fact as to which normative concepts we are to use. Eklund claims that the ardent realist cannot explain why this is so without plumping in favor of their own normative concepts or changing the topic. The paper first advances the discussion by clarifying two ways of understanding the question of which normative concepts to choose: a theoretical question about which concepts have the abstract property of *being normatively privileged* and a further practical question of which concepts we are to choose even granting some concepts are thus privileged. I argue that the ardent realist's best bet for answering the theoretical question while avoiding Eklund's dilemma is to provide a real definition of this property. I point out the difficulties for providing such a definition. I then argue that even with an answer to the theoretical question, the ardent realist faces a further dilemma in answering the practical question. In sum, though I see no knock-down argument against ardent realism, it may nonetheless die a death by a thousand cuts. I close by considering a deeper reason for why ardent realism is so difficult to defend: every argument starts somewhere. It is unclear how there can be an Archimedean point that makes no reference to any normative concepts that can nonetheless be employed to convince everyone to adopt ours. I then briefly propose two options for someone still inclined towards realism: either (i) accept that our normative concepts

are normatively privileged without attempting to explain why this is so, or (ii) be less ardent and accept a perspective-dependent account of normativity.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Eklund (2017) has argued that normative realists of a certain kind, who he calls ardent realists, face a serious dilemma. The ardent realist insists that mind-independent facts can settle which normative concepts we are to use. Reality itself somehow favors (in some normative sense) certain normative concepts over others. Eklund thinks that if there is a pluriverse of normative concepts (i.e., there are many different normative concepts besides the ones we use), ardent realists can only argue for their own concepts by either (i) plumping for their own normative concepts in an illicitly circular manner or (ii) changing the topic entirely. Both options are unacceptable and ardent realism is seemingly in trouble.

I will argue that though the ardent realist can answer Eklund's dilemma, she can do so only by accepting costly or difficult to establish claims. Thus, though I see no knock-down argument against ardent realism, it may die a death by a thousand cuts.

To carefully address Eklund's dilemma, I draw a distinction between two ways of understanding the question of which normative concepts to choose. This distinction is easily overlooked. Drawing it will help us understand why addressing one question need not entail fully addressing the other. The first way to understand the question is that it is a theoretical question concerning whether certain normative concepts have an abstract property that makes them special or particularly fitting in some normative sense for our use. For now, let us label this property *being normatively privileged*.<sup>1</sup> The second way is that it is a practical question concerning the choice of which normative concepts to employ regardless of whether we can settle the theoretical question.

Here is the road map. Section 1 introduces the notion of normative concepts, the possibility of a normative pluriverse, and the distinction between the theoretical and practical question of which normative concepts to choose. Section 2 explicates the theoretical question and Eklund's dilemma. Section 3 explains why it is difficult to reject the notion of a normative pluriverse and why doing so will not achieve what the ardent realist wants. The ardent realist's best bet for answering the theoretical question is to provide a real definition of *being normatively privileged*. I show why prospects for providing such a real definition are bleak. Section 4 elaborates on the practical question. Section 5 argues that even if we have an answer to the theoretical question, the ardent realist faces a further dilemma in answering the practical question. Section 6 closes the discussion by considering a deeper reason for why ardent realism is so difficult to defend: every argument starts somewhere. It is unclear how there can be an Archimedean point that makes no reference to any normative concepts that can nonetheless be deployed to convince everyone to adopt ours. I then briefly propose two options for someone still inclined towards realism: (i) accept that our normative concepts are normatively privileged without trying to explain why this is so or (ii) be less ardent and accept a perspective-dependent account of normativity.

<sup>1</sup>I use italics to name and mention properties. I use normal font when using or applying them.

## 2 | THE THEORETICAL AND THE PRACTICAL QUESTION OF NORMATIVE CONCEPT CHOICE

To introduce Eklund's challenge, we start with some remarks on normative concepts.<sup>2</sup> Normative concepts such as OUGHT, RIGHT and GOOD each have an associated normative role consisting of patterns of behaviors and sentiments when we use said concepts.<sup>3</sup> For example, when we apply OUGHT to some action A, we are typically motivated to A and approve of others who A. When we fail to A or others fail to A, we typically blame or disapprove of ourselves and others for such failures. Additionally, normative concepts with their associated normative roles refer to properties. As an illustration, the normative concept RIGHT could refer to the property of *maximizing utility*.

Given this setup, Eklund (2017, p. 18) invites us to consider 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.

By getting us to consider Alternative, Eklund invites us to consider a normative pluriverse where there are other sets of normative concepts that play the same or similar normative roles as our normative concepts do but refer to slightly or even very different properties. For ease of explication, while we have our concepts OUGHT, RIGHT, and GOOD, let us call their concepts OUGHT\*, RIGHT\* and GOOD\*. Note that different normative concepts with the same normative roles could recommend conflicting actions. For example, if RIGHT refers to *maximizing utility* and RIGHT\* refers to *maximizing disutility*, then while it is true (based on straightforward referential semantics) that we ought to A, it is also true that we ought\* not to A.

The possibility of Alternative poses two questions. First, we have a theoretical question.

**Theoretical Question:** Which normative concepts are normatively privileged?

The ardent realist thinks that there is a difference between our concepts and the ones used by the linguistic community in Alternative. Such a realist would intuitively want to say that there is some mind-independent fact of the matter as to why some set of normative concepts is somehow normatively special, different or privileged when compared to other sets of normative concepts. Again, let us give an arbitrary label for this property of specialness or privilege: *being normatively privileged*. The hope is that determining which set of concepts has this property is a question that can be settled by mind-independent facts. Ideally, answering the question would be analogous to picking out and separating the cubes in a bag containing

<sup>2</sup>For more detailed discussion, see Schroeter and Schroeter (2021).

<sup>3</sup>I use small caps to mention normative concepts and use regular lowercase letters when using them.

cubes and spheres. Just take everything out of the bag and pick out everything that has the property of being a cube and leave out all the objects that have the property of being a sphere. Likewise, we can identify the normative concepts that are normatively privileged and throw out the ones that aren't.

Second, there is a practical question.

**Practical Question:** Which normative concepts are we to adopt in our community?

This question concerns the practical decision of which set of normative concepts to employ in a community. How do we go about making this choice and what would settle this question for us? Again, the ardent realist wants to say that once we have discovered some mind-independent fact(s), that would settle the practical question of which set of normative concepts to choose. The ardent realist might think that once we have found out which concepts are normatively privileged, this would settle the practical question of which normative concepts to choose. Choose the ones that are normatively privileged! Having clarified the questions, let us consider how the ardent realist might answer each of them in turn.

### 3 | THE THEORETICAL QUESTION

In many cases, we have a mind-independent standard for determining whether something has a certain property. As we noted, we have no problem identifying a mind-independent standard for determining whether something is a cube or a sphere. We can easily tell one group to take the cubes and the other group to take the spheres out of the bag by appealing to mind-independent geometrical properties. The problem for the ardent realist is that it's not clear whether such a standard can be given for deciding which normative concepts are normatively privileged. Here is a dilemma first developed by Eklund (2017).

[First Horn] Suppose that in trying to answer the Theoretical Question, we give the following interpretation of the property *being normatively privileged*. We appeal to our own concept OUGHT and claim that what it is for some concepts to be normatively privileged is for them to be such that we ought to use them. We thus rephrase the Theoretical Question as follows: Which normative concepts ought we adopt? In stating the question this way, we already presume that our normative concept OUGHT is normatively privileged - that reality itself somehow normatively favors using it. But note that a member of an alternative linguistic community can likewise cast normative privilege in terms of what concepts we ought\* to use. Thus, she might recast the question as: Which normative concepts ought\* we adopt? It may even be true that we ought to use OUGHT while it is also true that we ought\* to use OUGHT\*. Unfortunately, we arrive at a stalemate and get no closer at providing an account of *being normative privileged*.

Here is another way of getting at the worry. *Being normatively privileged* is supposed to be a higher-level property of our first-order normative concepts that vindicates their use. Characterizing the property precisely in terms of the first-order normative concepts in question is to illicitly take those normative concepts to be antecedently privileged or vindicated. That is the exact thing that we were trying to determine in the first place.

Recalling our bag analogy, this would be like if two groups were asked to pick out objects in a bag that have some property *X* that they do not know how to characterize in a way that is clearly accepted by both groups. Each group knows that in virtue of picking an object, they will thereby believe their pick instantiates *X* even if they have no non-question begging way to convince the other group that the object indeed instantiates *X*.

[Second horn] Now suppose we try to state an independent standard to assess whether some concept is normatively privileged by avoiding any appeal to normative concepts. One might say that what it is for a concept to be normatively privileged is for it to have some non-normative descriptive property *P*. Now, our community and the alternative community can clearly agree whether any particular concept instantiates *P*. The worry, according to Eklund (**and one we will reconsider shortly**) is that we have now seemingly changed the subject away from normativity. Unless *P* is somehow clearly normatively relevant, it is unclear how it could be the basis for normative privilege.<sup>4</sup>

Illustrating with our bag analogy again, suppose both groups were told that property *X* is some unknown normative property. If group A claims that all the spheres have *X* and group B claims that all the cubes have *X*, each group needs to give some explanation as to why being a cube or being a sphere is somehow related to instantiating some *normative* property *X*. If no explanation is given, we have no idea how having a certain shape relates to the instantiation of some normative property. Instead, both groups have seemingly changed the topic away from normativity to the discussion of shapes.

## 4 | RESPONDING TO THE THEORETICAL QUESTION

Having introduced the dilemma behind the Theoretical Question in more detail, let us now consider how an ardent realist might respond.

### 4.1 | Strategy 1: There is no normative Pluriverse

Can the ardent realist reject the dilemma by denying the existence of a normative pluriverse in the first place? To do that, she could argue that no other normative concepts besides the ones that we employ exist. If we also assume that *being normatively privileged* is a comparative property (some concepts are more privileged than others) and we establish that there are no other normative concepts than ours, then maybe by default, our normative concepts are normatively privileged.<sup>5</sup>

There are two ways the ardent realist might try to nip the pluriverse bud. I contend that neither way is promising. We also have reason to reject the above assumption that our normative concepts are, by default, normatively privileged even if we can prove there is no normative pluriverse.

The first way is to establish that it is metaphysically impossible for there to be any other normative concepts than the ones that we employ. This would require establishing two claims. First, conceptual roles are reference fixing (i.e., each normative concept must refer to some unique property). Second, even if conceptual roles were reference fixing, there could be no other normative concepts that have even slightly different conceptual roles than our normative concepts.

Consider the first claim. It is unclear how the ardent realist can show that any given normative concept of ours must refer to some unique property. In fact, Schroeter and Schroeter (2021)

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<sup>4</sup>We'll examine this change of topic charge in the next section.

<sup>5</sup>I reject this assumption shortly.

have convincingly argued that no normative conceptual roles, on any plausible construal, are reference fixing. The most plausible approach in the literature for limiting the potential referents of our normative concepts is to appeal to reference magnetism. On this view, some properties serve as the most plausible and stable referents for our concepts. They do so in virtue of being more “joint-carving” or “elite”. But even proponents of this view in the normative domain such as Dunaway (2020) grant that there may be multiple candidate referents for our normative concepts that may score similarly in terms of eliteness.

Now consider the second claim. Even if our normative concepts are reference fixing, it is unclear how we could establish that there cannot be other normative concepts that have slightly or even vastly different normative conceptual roles than our normative concepts. Even assuming that all humans use the same concept BLAME with the same conceptual role (a questionable assumption already), we can imagine another normative concept BLAME\* that has a slightly different (or even radically different) conceptual role than ours. Its application would then involve a different pattern of behaviors and sentiments than the ones associated with our concept. It is unclear how the ardent realist could argue that there could be no such normative concept.

We now consider the second way to nip the normative pluriverse bud. Even if the ardent realist fails to establish that no normative concepts can exist other than ours, she could nonetheless try to establish that it is in some sense impossible (metaphysically, normatively, nomologically, biologically, etc.) *for humans* to have used any other normative concepts than our present ones. Would this be enough to establish that our normative concepts are somehow thereby privileged? Not quite.

First, note that such a claim is both implausible and difficult to establish. Suppose that this is a claim about metaphysical possibility. As we noted, an appeal to reference magnetism is insufficient to rule out the possible use of other normative concepts. At best, it could restrict the number of available candidates that beings like us could have used. Now if the claim is some kind of normative possibility (i.e., it is somehow normatively impossible for us to have used other normative concepts), then it is unclear how we would establish this claim without referring to our own normative concepts. If what we mean by the claim that it is normatively impossible for us to use OUGHT\* is that we ought to use OUGHT rather than OUGHT\*, then the ardent realist risks reverting back to the first horn.

What if the impossibility claim is something else like nomological or biological impossibility? Perhaps we could not have used other normative concepts due to facts about human nature or our evolutionary history. Let us grant that the ardent realist can give some such explanation. Even with explanation in hand, the ardent realist has to clear an additional bar. The explanation still needs to support her contention that our normative concepts are *normatively* privileged (in some intuitive sense) rather than privileged in some spurious sense.<sup>6</sup> Not just any explanation will do.

Though what this “normative sense” of privilege amounts to is precisely the thing in question, we can nonetheless give an example of an explanation that would intuitively fail to clear the bar. Suppose that it is impossible for us to use any other normative concepts because we found out that some mercurial deity has made it so. Nobody would deny that our normative concepts are indeed “deity privileged” if they discovered this. Nonetheless, deity privilege

<sup>6</sup>Granted, the reader might want me to say more about what this intuitive sense would be. The problem is that this is precisely the thing at issue for the ardent realist. We’ll touch on this issue when considering “markers” for *being normatively privileged* in section 5.



would not be the ground for normative privilege in any intuitive sense that the ardent realist seeks. The whims of a mercurial deity are normatively irrelevant. But note, why think that appeals to human nature, evolutionary history, or reference magnetism do any better in terms of being normatively relevant as the ground for being normatively privileged as opposed to merely being biologically, evolutionarily, or metaphysically privileged? Some further story needs to be told and it is unclear how the ardent realist can tell said story without appealing to her own normative concepts.

The above point also helps us realize that the assumption needed for this entire strategy is suspect. Even if there is no normative pluriverse, our normative concepts are not thereby normatively privileged by default. As Eklund (2020b) humorously points out, just because you are the only person to have sung a song you wrote, this does not thereby mean that your rendition is any good. And as our mercurial deity example illustrates, if said deity made it impossible for us to use any other normative concepts, what the ardent realist should conclude is that no concepts are normatively privileged after all. In short, rather than claim that deity selection is the true basis for mind-independent normative privilege, they should abandon ardent realism altogether.

In summary, it is unclear how the ardent realist can deny the existence of a normative pluriverse. Even if she could, it would not automatically establish that our normative concepts are thereby normatively privileged in the sense that she is after. Let us now see whether the ardent realist can directly provide an account of the property *being normative privileged*.

## 4.2 | Strategy 2: Reject both horns with a real definition of *being normatively privileged*

Recall the ardent realist's dilemma. Eklund contends that any account of normative privilege either implicitly favors one's own normative concepts or changes the topic. But what if the ardent realist can give an account of normative privilege that avoids both horns?

To illustrate how this might go, let us consider the following definition for the property *being water*.

**Water:** to be water =<sub>df</sub> to be dihydrogen monoxide ( $H_2O$ ).

First, the definition on the right hand side of “=<sub>df</sub>” does not repeat any terms on the left. There is no conceptual circularity. The definition is also not analytic. At the same time, the definition does not change the topic away from water. We now know that this is an informative definition given our understanding of modern chemistry.

**Water** is an instance of what Rosen (2015) would call a real definition.<sup>7</sup> Such a definition does not purport to give a definition for a word like “water” or a conceptual analysis of a concept like WATER, but a definition of a worldly entity - in this case, the property of *being water*. If real definitions of properties are possible, then perhaps the ardent realist can avoid the dilemma by giving a real definition of the property *being normatively privileged*. Such a real definition, if it is like **Water**, would avoid circularity or question-begging worries without changing the topic.

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<sup>7</sup>Of course, real definitions or constitutive analyses have roots in ancient and medieval philosophy.

Though the strategy is promising and there is no knock-down argument against it, the ardent realist faces an uphill battle. Note that **Water** and other physical property identifications established in the natural sciences are best case scenarios for real definitions. Here, the proponent of **Water** can establish her definition by showing that water and  $H_2O$  have the exact same physical properties. The actual history of this discovery involved electrolysis and reasoning with chemical principles. Nonetheless, there is a clear way of providing evidence for the definition.<sup>8</sup> Here, we know what we are trying to define (e.g., water) and have a method for checking the proposed definition.

There may also be successful real definitions outside of the natural or social sciences. Those sympathetic to metaphysical analyses, essences, or grounding contend that they can give real definitions of philosophically important properties such as *being conscious*, *being necessary*, *being the same person across time*, *knowing p* or normative properties such as *being wrong* or *being a reason for action*.<sup>9</sup> Granted, such definitions are more controversial and contested. It is also unclear whether there is a commonly agreed upon methodology for establishing such definitions and what counts as clear evidence for or against them.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, even in these cases, we have some independent grasp of the property being defined as well as a sense of what definitions are more successful than others. For example, even though we may not have an accepted real definition of knowledge, most would agree that it is not just justified true belief.

The issue for the ardent realist is that it is unclear whether we do have an independent grasp of what *being normatively privileged* amounts to as well as some agreed upon method for discovering it. The ardent realist contends that *being normatively privileged* is some property of normative concepts that somehow makes them favored, special, or uniquely eligible for our use in some normative sense. Now suppose we try to state markers for what would make a normative concept normatively privileged. The hope is that by finding the property that bears these markers, we will thereby identify what *being normative privileged* is. The problem is that we find ourselves back at the dilemma we started with once we attempt to state some markers for *being normatively privileged*. For example, if a marker for whether a normative concept is normatively privileged is that the privileged concepts are the ones we ought to use or have reason to use, we return back to the first horn of Eklund's dilemma: illicitly appealing to our own normative concepts. If the marker instead is that the relevant normative concepts are unavoidable or necessary in human normative communities, it may be unclear as to why such an explanation would be relevant in any normative sense that matters to the ardent realist. We return to the second horn of the dilemma: changing the topic.

Now, one might object that the first horn is not really an issue in the case of real definitions. For example, any real definition of knowledge will likely appeal to other epistemic concepts. Any real definition of modality will appeal to other metaphysical concepts. Perhaps any real definition of

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<sup>8</sup>Scientists did this in the late 1700s and early 1800s by showing that water can be decomposed into two parts oxygen and one part hydrogen through electrolysis.

<sup>9</sup>In the case of *being a reason*, we might be able to give a real definition of the property that does not appeal to other normative concepts but is nonetheless satisfactory. This is because we have some independent grasp of what might count as a reason for action and what does not. See Schroeder (2007) for an example of a desire-based real definition of reasons for action.

<sup>10</sup>That said, Williamson (2007) may be right that the methodology employed in philosophy is continuous with the sciences.



some normative property will also appeal to other normative concepts. So why not also grant that we will have to use normative concepts to provide a real definition of *normative privilege*?

First, the circularity in the epistemic, metaphysical, and even normative cases involves concepts and properties that are “on the same level”. Note that we are not claiming that they need vindication before we can use them. Thus, we are free to use the concept of JUSTIFICATION in a definition of *knowing P* without having to vindicate the former concept. But note that this is precisely not the case when it comes to the ardent realist’s hopes for *being normatively privileged*. The ardent realist takes this property to be a real higher-level property of certain first-order normative concepts that vindicates their use. Again, to use those same normative concepts in a real definition of *normative privilege* is to presume the very thing that is at issue (i.e., that certain normative concepts rather than others are thus vindicated).

Second, one person’s modus ponens is another’s modus tollens. The skeptic of real definitions may take the fact that metaphysical, epistemic or normative concepts are interdefinable as evidence that we are merely talking about our own concepts rather than about any properties “out there” in the world. Thus, just as a modal skeptic might give a conventionalist account of modality, the normative skeptic might balk at the idea that *being normatively privileged* is a real higher level property of concepts that exists outside of our conventions of talk or thought (if there are such conventions in the first place).

Summing up, I do not take the above to constitute a knock-down argument against every attempt at providing a real definition of *being normatively privileged*. My point is that such a task will not be easy for the ardent realist precisely because we do not have an independent grasp of *being normatively privileged* outside of the normative concepts that we employ. As a result, we find ourselves without a clear and agreed upon methodology for identifying and defining it either. We do have such a grasp for water and even for a variety of other philosophically interesting properties. That is why the ardent realist faces an uphill battle even if the strategy of real definition seems like an initially promising response to Eklund’s dilemma.

## 5 | THE PRACTICAL QUESTION

Suppose that the ardent realist succeeds in providing a widely accepted real definition of *being normatively privileged*. Though this resolves the Theoretical Question, would this thereby resolve the Practical Question of which normative concepts we are to use? Not exactly. To see why, we’ll have to think about the Practical Question more carefully.

Recently, Clarke-Doane (2020) has raised a version of the Practical Question and concludes that no mind-independent fact (normative or non-normative) can settle practical deliberation about which normative concepts to choose. He argues that this is because the conclusion of practical deliberation is not a truth-apt mental state such as belief but a non-truth-apt mental state such as an intention.<sup>11</sup>

*Pace* Clarke-Doane, mind-independent facts do settle practical deliberation about what to do in plenty of cases. For example, the fact that some action is the right thing to do is a fact that can settle practical deliberation for a morally virtuous agent. Once such an agent discovers this fact, deliberation ends, and she intends to do it. Likewise, for an ice cream lover craving some

<sup>11</sup>In particular, see chapter 6 of Clarke-Doane (2020) and especially section 6.4. There he argues that objectivity and realism stand in tension. See Eklund (2020a) for critical remarks.

name-brand ice cream now, the fact that it is available in her fridge settles deliberation about what to do: go to the fridge.

Despite my disagreement with Clarke-Doane, his worries about whether facts can settle practical deliberation does pose a dilemma for the ardent realist attempting to resolve the Practical Question. Either (i) the ardent realist adopts a simple and clear explanation as to why certain facts can settle the Practical Question at the cost of abandoning robust mind independence or (ii) the ardent realist faces a much more difficult task of explaining how mind-independent facts can settle the Practical Question. Let us examine each horn in turn.

## 6 | RESPONDING TO THE PRACTICAL QUESTION

### 6.1 | Horn 1: The calculative account of practical reasoning

How can some fact settle practical deliberation about what to do? We just noted that the fact that some action is right or virtuous settles the practical deliberation of a morally virtuous agent. Once the virtuous agent knows this about an action, they end deliberation and do said action when all goes well. Likewise, the fact that there is fancy ice cream in the fridge settles practical deliberation for the ice cream lover: go to the fridge.

On a venerable view of practical reasoning drawn from Aquinas, and more recently developed by Anscombe (1985) and Vogler (2002), facts settle practical deliberation because practical deliberation is primarily calculative and dependent on an agent's ends. Mind-independent facts settle practical deliberation and can serve as reasons for agents only insofar as they show how an action is a means to an end or is itself a way of achieving that end. In the cases above, we accept that facts can settle practical deliberation precisely because we can guess what ends those agents have. The morally virtuous agent aims to do what is right. The ice cream lover aims to get ice cream.

While this calculative view of practical reasoning gives a clear explanation for how facts can settle practical deliberation *pace* Clarke-Doane, the problem is that it is unclear whether the ardent realist can use it in her response to the Practical Question. If the calculative view of practical reasoning is correct, then the Practical Question of which normative concepts to choose can be settled by mind-independent facts only in the presence of mind-dependent ones.

For example, the fact that certain normative concepts are simpler to use, generate more utility if widely adopted, etc. would only settle the Practical Question if our ends are somehow served by employing simpler to use normative concepts or we care about public utility, etc.

Now, ardent realists should admit that facts about human ends or interests should play some role in settling practical deliberation about which normative concepts to use. For example, suppose we find out that OUGHT is highly normatively privileged but OUGHT\* is only slightly less so. However, OUGHT\* is much easier to use. In this case, the ardent realist can grant that we should use OUGHT\*.<sup>12</sup> One might also think that it is a potential advantage for the ardent realist that even if the Theoretical Question remains open, at least we can solve the practical question by considering which normative concepts, when used, would promote our ends.

The problem is that the ardent realist presumably wants the answer to the Theoretical Question to play not just some role but a significant or primary role in answering the Practical Question. This is especially so for more fundamental or central normative concepts as opposed to ones on

<sup>12</sup>For discussion of choosing normative concepts on the basis of practical interests, see Thomasson (2020).

the periphery of our normative conceptual networks. For example, if OUGHT is highly normative privileged and OUGHT\* is completely lacking in privilege, the ardent realist would deny that ease of use considerations can settle the Practical Question in favor of the latter concept over the former especially if they are supposed to be at the center of our normative conceptual web. Again, her contention is that facts about mind-independent reality settles which normative concepts we are to use. But on the present Calculative Account, facts about human ends (e.g., mind-dependent facts) are what allows mind-independent facts to settle the Practical Question of which concepts to choose. If human ends were to change, then so would our answer to the Practical Question.

If the ardent realist insists that the calculative view is correct but still wants her answer to the Theoretical Question to play an important or even decisive role in answering the Practical Question, she has two options. First, she could claim that what it is for certain normative concepts to be normatively privileged just is for them to promote our ends when adopted. Or she could respond that our main end in choosing which normative concepts to employ is whether they are normatively privileged. Neither option squares well with the ardent realist.

The ardent realist can accept the first option, but this requires abandoning the robust mind independence that she may have hoped for. Her view comes much closer to Humeanism or social constructivism with regard to normative concepts. Neither is a traditionally realist view, but I grant that the ardent realist is free to go this route at the cost of her own prior commitments. The second option faces two problems. First, it is unlikely that humans aim to choose normative concepts based on whether said concepts are normatively privileged. Maybe we happen to do so extensionally, but not intensionally or intentionally. Even if we did, this gets the order of explanation backwards for the ardent realist. Normative privilege matters for the Practical Question not because we take it to matter, but the other way around.

## 6.2 | Horn 2: Normative privilege and the practical question

If the ardent realist abandons the calculative view of practical reasoning, she now faces an uphill battle in explaining how answers to the Theoretical Question or facts in general could resolve the Practical Question.

To see why, the best strategy for the ardent realist at this point is to think in terms of the constitutive aim of action. Rather than an aim or end that we determine, suppose the nature of action sets an objective aim for all of us that then determines which facts settle practical deliberation. To illustrate, we might think that facts can settle epistemic deliberation about what to believe if we think about the constitutive aim of belief. Suppose that aim is truth. If so, then facts that show a proposition to be true would settle deliberation about whether to believe it.

Now, suppose that there is a constitutive aim to action. The ardent realist can try to make the case that an answer to the Theoretical Question is directly related to the constitutive aim of action. Note that deciding on which normative concepts to use is a deliberation about which action to take (e.g., which concepts to use). If so, then perhaps she can show that facts about which normative concepts are normatively privileged can settle the Practical Question of which normative concepts to use.

Though initially promising, the ardent realist faces three issues. To begin, Enoch (2006) has argued that even if we can find the constitutive aim of action, this will not have any implications on what would settle practical deliberation.<sup>13</sup> Even if this issue can be addressed, there are two others.

<sup>13</sup>Enoch points out that even if the constitutive aim of action is identified, we can always wonder why we should act as opposed to do something else such as schmack which has its own separate constitutive aim.

First, we do not presently have consensus on what the constitutive aim of action is. Here are just a few competing suggestions in the literature:

1. The aim of action is to constitute oneself as an agent and author of one's actions as opposed to being a mere animal or a set of motivational drives (Korsgaard, 2009).
2. The aim of action is to have self-understanding or knowledge of what one is doing (Velleman, 1989).
3. The aim of action is to exert oneself in ways that involve facing and meeting challenges (Katsafanas, 2013).
4. To act is to engage in the norm-governed practice of intending (Shapiro Schapiro, 2001).
5. The aim of action is to act in ways that allow one to endorse one's own action (Buss, 1999).
6. The aim of action is to better understand the activity that one is doing and the good of that activity (Brewer, 2009).

Though these philosophers have compelling arguments for their own views, it is curious that we do not yet have arguments from them against all the others. Again, this is not to say that no such arguments are forthcoming, but it is to point out that much more work needs to be done if the ardent realist wants to take this route.

Second, suppose we grant the ardent realist that there is some unique constitutive aim of action. Suppose she also shows that this constitutive aim applies to the practical decision of which normative concepts to use. She still needs to show that an answer to the Theoretical Question is appropriately related to the constitutive aim of action. Maybe this can be done. However, it is highly unclear how *being normative privileged* (an abstract higher-level property of normative concepts) will be directly related to any plausible account of the constitutive aim of action. Whatever *being normative privileged* amounts to, why think that would be related to the achievement of self-knowledge, constituting oneself as an agent, challenging oneself, etc.?

Again, this is not to say that the present strategy is unworkable. Nonetheless, it depends on three components, each of which are suspect. The ardent realist needs not only (i) a real definition of *being normatively privileged* and (ii) a knock down argument for a particular constitutive aim of action but also (iii) reasons to believe that facts about normative privilege are directly related to the constitutive aim of action and can settle practical deliberation.

Summing up section 5, I have argued that the ardent realist faces two horns when it comes to explaining how facts (especially facts about which normative concepts are normative privileged) can settle the Practical Question. I have argued that on the calculative view of practical deliberation, we can easily understand how facts can settle the Practical Question. The problem is that it becomes less clear whether facts about the normative privilege of normative concepts could do so as well. More importantly, it is unclear whether such a position would retain the mind independence that the ardent realist is supposed to be committed to. Second, the ardent realist could try to show that facts about normative privilege are related to the constitutive aim of action and thus could settle the Practical Question. The problem is that we have no consensus on what that aim is, and we do not have good reason to hope that facts about normative privilege would be related to that aim.

## 7 | THE SATISFIED ARDENT REALIST VS. THE LESS ARDENT REALIST

Taking stock of the last four sections, note that I have not shown that the Theoretical or Practical Question are unanswerable. Nor have I shown that the answers to these questions

cannot be related in the way the ardent realist wants. Nonetheless, the above should show just how difficult it is to establish the claims that the ardent realists need. In sum, while I see no knock-down argument against ardent realism, it may nonetheless die a death by a thousand cuts.

Let us now take a step back. Why is ardent realism so difficult to establish or defend? My suspicion is that a defense of ardent realism would require defending the existence of an Archimedean point that makes no reference to any normative concepts that can nonetheless be deployed to convince everyone to adopt ours. If this is what ardent realism requires, then we have a familiar reason to be suspicious of this view.

The familiar reason is a simple platitude: every argument (normative or otherwise) has to start somewhere. If someone denies that *modus ponens* is (except for highly specific circumstances) a logically valid inference rule or affirms that truth is completely irrelevant to what we are to believe in every case, there may be no neutral perspective from which we could convince that person otherwise. In the case of ethics, if someone denies that we are to pursue good and avoid evil or affirms that being gratuitously violent and cruel are virtues, it's not clear how we might rationally compel that person to think otherwise from some neutral perspective either. Reworking a quote from David Lewis, "But whoever thought that philosophy could replace the hangman?".<sup>14</sup> Even Rawls's (1971) "Original Position" or Gauthier's (1987) "Archimedean Point" starts by appealing to some basic normative concepts such as fairness or rationality. At some point, we may just find ourselves using certain fundamental normative concepts that we have no idea how to vindicate without using those very same concepts. But it may also be the case that in such cases we feel no urge to seek such vindication anyway.

If the above is correct, a normative realist could consider two options. First, she could nonetheless remain ardent and insist that there is a special set of normative concepts that are normatively privileged but abandon the task of trying to explain this from an Archimedean point. This option involves a certain level of acceptance that recognizes limits to our explanatory ambitions. Second, she could still keep key aspects of normative realism but become less ardent. She accepts that there is no such thing as normative privilege in a fully mind or perspective independent sense. I close by briefly discussing each option.

## 7.1 | The satisfied ardent realist

If the ardent realist insists that our normative concepts are normatively privileged but concedes that there is no way that we can show this from an Archimedean point, is she still rationally permitted to hold this view? Perhaps.

Suppose that our normative concepts are in good working order and shared by nearly everyone. They tend to serve us well even if there is room for gradual revision at various parts of our normative conceptual web. Also suppose that our adopted normative concepts were not the product of normatively irrelevant or suspect processes (e.g., power struggles, evolutionary pressure, the whims of a mercurial deity, alien interference, etc.). Instead, we learn that our normative concepts have some respectable pedigree (e.g., chosen by God, unified by the Form of the Good, refer to metaphysically elite properties, derived from a widely accepted conception of human

<sup>14</sup>This is from the epigraph that starts Enoch (2006) which is attributed to David Lewis.

nature or the constitutive aim of action/intention, etc.). In short, we have reason to trust that our normative concepts are fit for us, functional, and coherent.<sup>15</sup>

If this were the case, an ardent realist can insist that not only can we trust our adopted normative concepts but the above also gives us decent reason to believe that our normative concepts are normatively privileged. Granted, such a realist still relies on her own normative concepts to make this point. For example, if God chose our normative concepts, this would be normatively relevant only if we think God's choices are reason giving or normatively authoritative for us. Same for any other respectable pedigree just given. The ardent realist will still have to appeal to her own normative concepts in any attempt to vindicate the normative respectability of their origins and to explain why such a respectable pedigree is a plausible enough stand in for or evidence of normative privilege.

The ardent realist who is satisfied with this result and grants that there is no Archimedean point from which we can vindicate our normative concepts is what I call a **satisfied ardent realist**. As someone sympathetic to ardent realism, I find this position reasonable. There comes a point where explanations simply give out. The satisfied ardent realist is similar to the Moorean realist about the external world who rejects the explanatory demands of the external world skeptic. The satisfied ardent realist, given the general trustworthiness of our normative concepts, insists that no further explanations are possible or even needed to show that our normative concepts are normatively privileged. What else can the skeptic want? If we cannot provide it – then skeptic be damned.

## 7.2 | The less ardent realist

Now consider a second option. Consider the **less ardent realist**. She accepts normative realism but abandons ardency – that normative concepts are normatively privileged in a robust perspective independent sense.

First, note that normative realism without ardency is possible. Suppose realism simply requires that (i) normative language is truth apt and descriptive rather than expressive, (ii) there are normative properties that serve as the stable referents for our normative concepts, and (iii) humans tend to make true normative statements. Neither Eklund's dilemma nor anything that I have said above gives us any reason to abandon these claims.

The less ardent realist accepts realism but ultimately abandons ardency because she thinks there can be no proof that our normative concepts are normatively privileged from an Archimedean point. Given our discussion in sections 1–5, she may be right. Absent such proof, the less ardent realist denies that there is any such thing as normative privilege at all or claims instead that it is a perspective-dependent property that we project onto our normative concepts.

While some less ardent realists might take the fact that our normative concepts have one of the respectable pedigrees mentioned above as sufficient for trusting them and using them in a fully immersed way, other less ardent realists might be tempted to think that such trust can only be justified if ardency were true, and we have proof that our normative concepts are normatively privileged from an Archimedean point. Otherwise, any choice of normative concepts is ultimately arbitrary or meaningless.

<sup>15</sup>Of course, if we have reason to think that our normative concepts are highly dysfunctional, then we may end up being highly skeptical of and detached from our normative concepts when we use them.



Here, Nagel's (1971) account of the absurd is instructive. He argues that our sense of the absurd arises from a gap between two perspectives that we cannot avoid. From the subjective point of view, our lives are meaningful and significant. However, as reflective beings, we can always adopt a more objective perspective from which our lives lack meaning and significance. The same predicament arises with our normative concepts. From the perspective of our own normative concepts, those very same concepts seem normatively vindicated. Yet, when considered from an objective perspective outside of those normative concepts in full view of the normative pluriverse, those concepts lack normative vindication.

What are we to do? We could refuse to step back and question our normative concepts. However, we cannot do this consciously as we can always take a reflective perspective outside of them. It may also be worthwhile to re-examine our normative concepts (think of the concept CHASTITY). Or we could simply abandon the use of normative concepts altogether. This is even more implausible.

A third option is to adopt a form of ironic distance from our normative concepts. One way to do this is to potentially divide our practical lives between a public commitment to a shared set of normative concepts while keeping doubts as private individuals. Rorty (1989, p. 73) labels this divided person the ironist:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power, not herself.

I am unsure whether this is ultimately stable or sustainable.<sup>16</sup>

Fortunately, Nagel's discussion may again be helpful. The fact that we are reflective beings capable of examining our own normative concepts is the cause of our own need to vindicate them. But just as it may not matter that nothing matters from an objective perspective, it may not matter that our normative concepts cannot be vindicated from an Archimedean point either. This desire for objective normative vindication may just be a by-product of the fact that we are self-reflective beings. It may also be a by-product of a philosophical impulse to dehistoricize or denaturalize our normative concepts.

Recognizing this, we could focus instead on taking up the viewpoint from here when it comes to our normative concepts. From this viewpoint, our normative concepts are not just arbitrary. We can hope that others share this viewpoint and work towards agreement if they do not. It is tempting to think that the only way we can vindicate and fully engage in our normative conceptual practices is to supply proof that our normative concepts are somehow normatively privileged from an Archimedean point. But there is a pragmatist alternative. Queloz and Cueni (2021) could be right that a plausible explanation of how our normative conceptual practices function well for us given our needs is all we need to fully engage in our normative conceptual practices without irony.<sup>17</sup> Whether they are normatively privileged from an Archimedean point is beside the point. If so, less

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<sup>16</sup>For criticism of Rorty's view, see Queloz and Cueni (2021). For criticism of Nagel's ironist solution in relation to existentialism, see Webber (2018).

<sup>17</sup>For detailed discussion of how concepts can be affirmed on the basis of a 'pragmatic genealogy,' see Queloz (2021).

ardent realists, despite their abandonment of ardency, can still affirm the normative concepts we use, continue to adjust them so that they can serve us better, and, with luck, find a way to make peace with those who may use different normative concepts. Though I have my doubts about this pragmatist alternative for the less ardent realist, it is nonetheless worth developing in depth.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

I have argued that even though ardent realists could respond to Eklund's dilemma, it would require defending claims that are either costly to her commitments or difficult to establish. This is not to say that a defense of ardent realism is impossible, but it does highlight the relevant difficulties that must be addressed. I've also argued that perhaps the underlying motivation for ardent realism becomes less attractive once we see it for what it is. Perhaps we should not expect to be able to rationally compel any conceivable rational being to use certain normative concepts from an Archimedean point that does not appeal to those very same concepts. But this is just to re-emphasize the platitude that every argument starts somewhere - even normative ones. We closed by considering two options for those inclined toward realism. Either (i) proceed as an ardent realist while accepting our own explanatory limits or (ii) deny that normative privilege exists in any fully mind or perspective-independent manner. Though I favor the former option, the latter option may be more plausible than we have originally thought. I submit both for further exploration.<sup>18</sup>

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