

# **Ardent Realism without Referential Normativity\***

**Symposium Contribution,  
Matti Eklund's *Choosing Normative Concepts*  
Inquiry**

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**Tristram McPherson**  
Ohio State University  
[dr.tristram@gmail.com](mailto:dr.tristram@gmail.com)

## **Abstract:**

This paper addresses a central positive claim in Matti Eklund's *Choosing Normative Concepts*: that a certain kind of metaphysically ambitious realist about normativity – the *ardent realist* – is committed to the metasemantic idea that the distinctive inferential role of normative concepts suffices to fix the extension of those concepts. I argue first that commitment to this sort of inferential role metasemantic view does nothing to secure ardent realism. I then show how the ardent realist can address Eklund's leading challenge without appeal to distinctively metasemantic commitments.

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\* I am indebted for helpful discussion of related ideas to participants and the audience at the Pacific APA symposium on *Choosing Normative Concepts* (where a distant ancestor of this paper was presented) to participants in my graduate seminar *Normative Realism and Normative Authority*, to Derek Baker, Matt Bedke, Billy Dunaway, David Plunkett, and especially to Matti himself.

## Introduction

Matti Eklund's *Choosing Normative Concepts* (hereafter: *CNC*) is an unusually rich contribution to the philosophical foundations of ethics. Unlike most monographs, *CNC* does not focus on systematically defending a particular view. Rather, Eklund's focus is to help us to better understand a range of important but often neglected questions and challenges that metaethicists – especially realists of a certain ambitious stripe – confront. Metaethicists: ignore it to your detriment. It repays careful study, and I expect it to constitute an indispensable resource that will inform the next generation of central metaethical debates.

In the usual style for symposia, I will neglect much of what is illuminating in this book. Instead, I concentrate on a small set of central issues where I am most optimistic that my engagement – and Eklund's replies – can advance the dialectic. Much of the book discusses a distinctive kind of normative realist: the *ardent realist*. The most prominent claim defended in the book is that ardent realism requires a metasemantic thesis that he calls *referential normativity*. In these comments, I argue against this claim. I begin by introducing ardent realism and its relationship to a striking kind of symmetry argument that looms large in Eklund's thinking (§1). I then show that it is unclear how his favored approach can help the ardent realist (§2). Finally, I explain how ardent realism can be defended against the symmetry argument without appealing to referential normativity (§3).

### 1. Alarming Symmetries and Ardent Realism

Imagine that the oracle has just told you that:

- There are mind-independent normative facts
- You have excellent semantic and epistemic access to those facts,
- Indeed, almost all of your normative beliefs are true in virtue of those facts
- The points above illuminate the nature of part of reality. They are not simply true because of the sort of minimalist resources popular among quasi-realists

If you are a normative realist, it might seem that your days of metanormative anxiety are over. But, as Matti Eklund shows, this might be a mistake. To see why, we need to consider a hypothesis concerning possible normative terms, which loom large in *CNC*:

**Alternative** (the basic idea): the hypothesis that there could be normative terms with the *same normative role* as ours, which have different extensions<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a simplification of Eklund's official statement of the hypothesis on 18. I follow Eklund here in using 'extensions' broadly; roughly you can think of the extension of a term as its contribution to the truth-conditions of sentences containing that term. Throughout *CNC*,

Alternative mentions what Eklund calls *normative role*. Roughly, normative role is the “downstream” inferential role of a normative term in deliberation and interpersonal criticism.<sup>2</sup> For example, consider the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT. We expect first-personal judgments of the form *I practically ought to do A* to motivate doing A, and to often issue non-deviantly in Aing.<sup>3</sup> We might attempt to characterize the downstream inferential role of the concept PRACTICAL OUGHT in terms of these sorts of role in motivation and deliberation.

Suppose that normative realism is true, but Alternative is possible. To be a bit less abstract, suppose that there is a possible community C, with a concept GOOD\* that has the same normative role as our concept GOOD, but a quite different extension. You criticize a person from this community for something they did, saying *what you did was not good*. They shrug and point out correctly that it was good\*. (You can also imagine the conversation in an explicitly metaphysical key: you point out that their action lacks the property of goodness. They note that it bears the property of goodness\*, etc.) Suppose further that the only criticisms that you can raise of their action are criticisms deploying your normative concepts. And suppose that for every such criticism, they can (without error) potentially raise a perfectly symmetrical criticism of you using their concepts.

This sort of symmetry can seem alarming. Thoughts involving normative concepts like GOOD, REASON, or OUGHT seem to have distinctive significance in our deliberation and reflection. But if the sort of symmetry just imagined were possible, there would seemingly be nothing to be said in favor of using our concepts that does not have a parallel consideration in favor (or perhaps: favor\*?) of using the alternative concepts. This in turn might seem to suggest that the special significance that our concepts appear to have might simply be an artifact of an arbitrary selection of normative concepts on our part. And this (you might think) is incompatible with reflectively retaining the special significance of our normative concepts.<sup>4</sup>

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Eklund largely sets aside complications at the concept/word interface. For brevity, I will follow him in doing so.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, single quotation marks (e.g. ‘cat’) are used strictly to mention linguistic items. Double quotation marks (e.g. “cat”) are used for a variety of tasks including quoting others’ words, scare quotes, and mixes of use and mention. Terms in small caps (e.g. OUGHT) pick out concepts.

<sup>3</sup> As the examples suggest, I am using ‘inferential’ in an expansive way, to include transitions to motivational states. In introducing normative role, Eklund describes it as “...the action-guiding role, perhaps motivational role, which is associated with the predicate or concept *and is that by virtue of which the predicate or concept counts as normative...* (10, emphasis added). I ignore the italicized conjunct in the text, since it stipulates a controversial connection between normative role as glossed in the text, and the individuation of normative concepts. I want to hold that connection as a substantive question for our inquiry, not a matter of stipulation concerning ‘normative role,’ and Eklund appears to want to do so as well, in Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>4</sup> It may be helpful to compare the way that the alarming symmetry threatens the intelligibility of our embracing the significance of our normative concepts, with Korsgaard’s claims that accepting Mandeville’s hypothesis would undermine the intelligibility of our moral

Notice that the alarming symmetry appears fully compatible with everything that we imagined the oracle telling us. But at least many normative realists will take it that, if the alarming symmetry cannot be dispelled, reality has not vindicated their metanormative commitments.

Eklund provides one way of thinking about what such normative realists would want here, in the guise of the character he calls the *ardent realist*. The core idea with which Eklund introduces ardent realism is this:

**Core Idea** “...reality itself favors certain ways of valuing and acting...” (1)<sup>5</sup>

It is possible to read Core Idea *literally*. Consider a view of metaphysics that combines the idea that the real is the fundamental (e.g. Fine 2001), with the familiar theist idea that the most fundamental thing – God – is an entity with mental states. On this view, provided that God favored some ways of acting, Core Idea would be vindicated in a transparently literal way.

Because this sort of theist interpretation is nowhere on Eklund’s radar, we do better to understand Core Idea as a metaphor. Because Eklund introduces ardent realism and Alternative together, you might think that ardent realism is just any realism that dispels the alarming symmetry. But – as I will belabor in §2 – this would be a mistake. This is because some ways of dispelling the alarming symmetry have nothing to do with the Core Idea that orients us to what ardent realism is. (Eklund never provides a clear non-metaphorical gloss on ardent realism; I will propose one in §3.)

Schematically, there are two ways of dispelling the alarming symmetry:

- (i) allowing that Alternative is possible, and then finding a way to *break* the symmetry, or
- (ii) ruling out the possibility of Alternative, thereby *preventing* the symmetry challenge from arising.

Eklund defends few grand theses in *CNC*. Arguably the most central thesis that he defends is that, in the face of the challenge posed by Alternative, one can only vindicate ardent realism by appeal to strategy (ii) (e.g. 205).<sup>6</sup> In these comments I argue against this thesis. I begin in the next section by showing that – even if strategy (ii) prevents the alarming symmetry from arising – it does nothing to vindicate the Core Idea of ardent realism.

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commitments (1996, 1.1.1). It is also worth noting that a kind of deflationary pluralism about normative concepts (Copp 2005, Tiffany 2007, Baker 2018), embraces this sort of arbitrariness.  
<sup>5</sup> All undated references are to *CNC*.

<sup>6</sup> One possible reason for rejecting strategy (i) is that you think that breaking the symmetry would require commitment to ontologically suspect entities. This is not Eklund’s worry: he suggests that we cannot break the symmetry even if we appeal to an ontology that some might find extravagant.)

## 2. Ardent Realism and Referential Normativity

This section considers the relationship between ardent realism and Eklund's favored strategy for ruling out the alarming symmetry, which involves denying the possibility of Alternative. This strategy is metasemantic in nature because, as Eklund helpfully illustrates, whether Alternative is possible is a matter of the metasemantics of our normative terms.<sup>7</sup> To see this, consider a pair of contrasting examples.

First, consider a metasemantic theory on which the extension of a term is grounded in facts about which type of entity causally regulates the use of that term in the relevant linguistic community.<sup>8</sup> On this view, our word 'water' refers to H<sub>2</sub>O precisely because H<sub>2</sub>O causally regulates our usage of 'water.' By contrast, Hilary Putnam's (1975) imagined Twin Earthlings' term 'water' refers to XYZ, because XYZ is what causally regulate their usage of this term. If the causal regulation theory were true of normative terms, it would seemingly entail that Alternative is possible. This is because it appears possible that, in different linguistic communities, different properties could causally regulate use of words with identical associated normative role.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, consider the sort of inferential role metasemantics that many philosophers find plausible for the logical connectives. The leading idea here can be illustrated by example. It is often claimed that the connective 'and' is associated with a certain inferential role: its introduction rule is: from  $\{P, Q\}$  infer  $P$  and  $Q$ . Its elimination rule is: from  $P$  and  $Q$  infer either or both of  $P$  or  $Q$ . You might think that, given a bit of metalogic, only one semantic value for 'and' – for example, only one contribution to the truth-conditions of sentences – is compatible with this inferential role. (To make this idea into a metasemantic theory, one would need to say something about what relation a speaker needs to bear to the relevant inferential role in order to count as tokening 'and.' I set this important complication aside here.)

One could attempt to offer a similar inferential role metasemantics for normative terms, according to which facts about the normative role of a normative term or concept suffice to necessitate the extension of that term or concept. Eklund introduces a new bit of jargon here: a term whose normative role suffices to determine its extension in this way is *referentially normative*.

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<sup>7</sup> For many purposes, it will be crucial to distinguish the *metasemantic* project of (roughly) explaining what grounds the semantic properties of normative terms from the distinct project of explaining what grounds facts about the extensions of token concepts, understood as constituents of *thoughts*. I follow Eklund here in ignoring this important dimension of complexity.

<sup>8</sup> The most famous metaethical exemplar of this sort of theory is offered by Boyd 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Horgan and Timmons (1992, etc.) famously object to Boyd's theory by highlighting this consequence of his view. Eklund discusses the contrast between his arguments and Horgan and Timmons' arguments in §2.4.

Because the hypothesis in Alternative involves holding fixed normative role while varying extension, our normative terms being referentially normative would render Alternative impossible. Eklund proposes that the only way to vindicate ardent realism is to rule out Alternative by appealing to referential normativity. This in turn prevents the alarming symmetry from arising.

As I will now show, this strategy faces a central difficulty. Recall that the Core idea of ardent realism is of reality favoring ways of valuing and acting. But plausible ways of developing the idea of referential normativity have nothing to do with this Core Idea. It is thus hard to see how they could help to vindicate ardent realism.

To begin, notice that referential normativity is *insufficient* to capture the Core Idea. Consider two examples. First, consider the inferential role account of ‘and’ just sketched. Nothing in that account suggests the analogue of the Core Idea - that *reality favors* using a connective with this inferential role. To see this, notice that we can easily drum up logical connectives with intuitively gerrymandered inferential roles. For example, imagine a Goodmanian connective, which has an inferential role that takes the date as input, so that it has the introduction and elimination rules associated with ‘and’ before time *t* and the rules associated with ‘or’ afterwards.<sup>10</sup> There is no possible alternative scenario that we can construct for this connective, but reality surely does not favor it.<sup>11</sup>

The insufficiency can also be illustrated by a metaethical example. David Enoch and I independently used Alternative-style cases to object to philosophers like T. M. Scanlon who claim both to be realists and that their realism somehow avoids any metaphysical commitments (Enoch 2011, McPherson 2011). To simplify greatly, we considered a pair of linguistic communities who used normative concepts with what Eklund would call the same normative role, but different extensions. We argued that – in light of avoiding metaphysical commitments – Scanlon could not vindicate the intuitive thought that (at least) one of those communities was making a mistake in their normative practices.

In arguing in this way, I take Enoch and myself to have assumed that what was missing from Scanlon’s account was precisely the ability to say that reality *avored* our practices, à la Core Idea. For Scanlon to agree that reality favored our practices would have been for him to abandon his quietism for something more like ardent realism.

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<sup>10</sup> For simplicity of illustration, I am assuming that the words ‘or’ and ‘and’ are associated with the inferential roles familiar from propositional logic. I am not sure this is true of these words in English.

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, philosophers such as Sider (2011), who could be described as taking reality to favor certain connectives, are going to take gerrymandered connectives like this one to be exemplary *non-favored* connectives.

In his (2014, 29) Scanlon replied to this objection by claiming instead that – as Eklund would put it – Alternative is impossible. The key thing to notice is that *this* way of replying appears fully compatible with Scanlon’s quietism, and puts no pressure on him to become an ardent realist. Suppose that Scanlon had filled out his reply by appealing to a metasemantic theory that secured referential normativity.<sup>12</sup> In this case, the appeal to referential normativity would function precisely as a way of avoiding *both* ardent realism and the alarming symmetry.

The points just sketched are not decisive, because Eklund does not claim that ruling out Alternative is *sufficient* for ardent realism, only that it is *necessary*. But the problem here is nonetheless deep. For the examples show that it is unclear why ruling out Alternative – a metasemantic commitment – should have *any* bearing on whether ardent realism is possible.

We can provide further independent support for this point by appeal to the somewhat controversial tool of *judgments about counterpossible cases* (for discussion and defense see e.g. Nolan 1997 and Bjerring 2014). Return to the logical connectives, and grant that the inferential role of ‘and’ is compatible with only one possible semantic value of ‘and.’ Now, consider the following thought: *suppose* – metasemantically *per impossibile* – that there was a word ‘and\*’ with the inferential role of ‘and’ but a *different* semantic value. And now consider the following question: could reality favor using ‘and’ over using ‘and\*’? I take it that the philosopher like Ted Sider, who takes reality to have logical structure should say: “Yes: the semantic value of ‘and’ matches reality’s logical structure, while that of ‘and\*’ does not!” While someone who denies that reality has logical structure should say “No.” The fact that the word ‘and\*’ is impossible is orthogonal to this dispute.

Similarly, suppose that ‘ought’ is referentially normative, but that – metasemantically *per impossibile* – that there was a word ‘ought\*’ that had the same normative role as ‘ought,’ but which has a different extension. It seems to me that the proponent of the Core Idea should say the same thing about this counterpossible case that I had Sider saying about the connectives in the preceding paragraph. That is, she should say that reality might favor using one or the other of ‘ought’ and ‘ought\*’, over using the other. By contrast, the quietist should presumably deny this.

It is controversial whether judgments about counterpossibles are probative. However, I think that they do important work here. The Core Idea of ardent realism is that of acting in light of representations of properties that *reality* favors or disfavors. The impossibility of Alternative, far from helping to secure the Core Idea, seems to make it harder to identify such a role, by making it impossible to track that role by using counterfactuals. Counterpossibles are a means of seeking to identify the explanatory contrasts, given this difficulty.

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<sup>12</sup> As Eklund points out (151), Scanlon has offered no explanation of why Alternative is impossible.

To sum up the paper thus far: Eklund draws our attention to an interesting kind of anxiety about normative thought and talk, based in what I have called alarming symmetry hypotheses. In my view, ardent realism and referential normativity are two *distinct* (although compatible) ways of attempting to rule out such hypotheses. As I have sought to show, referential normativity by itself appears to do nothing to secure the Core Idea of ardent realism, and readers of Eklund's book would do well not to follow Eklund in connecting the two ideas in the way that he does.

### 3. The Case for Optimism about Ardent Realism

As I mentioned above, Eklund takes his book to make a case for a conditional thesis: that ardent realism *requires* referential normativity. The previous section showed that it is difficult to see how referential normativity plays a crucial role in ardent realism. And Eklund never addresses this question. So perhaps the most charitable explanation is simple: he thinks that there is no hope for the ardent realism if Alternative is possible. So even if it is mysterious why referential normativity is a necessary condition for the truth of ardent realism, it must be such a condition.

Given this, you might think that the discussion in the preceding section is bad news for the ardent realist. After all, that discussion suggested that it is unclear how to secure ardent realism, even if referential normativity can be established. In this section I argue that, while Eklund's discussion raises important challenges for the ardent realist, there are reasons for optimism about her ability to overcome those challenges. I first clarify *which* sorts of normativity are the clearest candidates for ardent realism, and which are not. I then introduce a concept with which we can state an informative gloss on ardent realism. With this concept in hand, I rebut Eklund's direct arguments against a related attempt to answer the alarming symmetry. I conclude by discussing a crucial connected question concerning the priority relation between normative concepts and normative properties.

#### 3.1 Which Normativity?

There are many distinct classes of normative concepts. Consider, as an illustrative list: LEGAL CHESS MOVE; POLITE; FELONY; IMPRUDENT; MORALLY WRONG; PRACTICAL OUGHT. Given this, it is worth clarifying which normativity is the ardent realist's target. For if we don't two issues arise. First, the sheer diversity of normative standards might threaten to make symmetry arguments seem inevitable. Second, the sort of symmetry we introduced above is not really alarming when we consider it for some normative concepts.

To begin, recall:



**Alternative** (the basic idea): the hypothesis that there could be normative concepts with the same *normative role* as ours, which have different extensions

Depending on how one individuates normative roles, it is plausible that Alternative could be unproblematically true for LEGAL CHESS MOVE, POLITE, and FELONY. After all, there just *are* diverse variants of chess, etiquette conventions, and legal systems in place. There need be nothing alarming here: that I could be playing crazyhouse (a fun chess variant) is no distinctive grounds for anxiety as I play chess.

Notice that Alternative being true of LEGAL CHESS MOVE, POLITE, and FELONY is plausibly compatible with reality favoring certain of these over others: perhaps some games, conventions, and legal systems are *better* than others. Of course, it is also compatible with there being – “from reality’s perspective” – nothing to choose between chess or crazyhouse, or between this or that decent system of etiquette.

This shows that in order to identify the core issue for the ardent realist, we need to distinguish *among* the normative concepts. In other work, I have marked a distinction between the generic normativity shared by all of the concepts listed above, and *authoritatively* normative concepts.<sup>13</sup> These latter concepts are those which purport to have a distinctive kind of authority in our reasoning. (PRACTICAL OUGHT is a strong candidate to be an authoritatively normative concept.) I submit that authoritatively normative concepts are the concepts for which ardent realism is most plausible, and for which the sorts of symmetries described in §1 are most clearly alarming.

Eklund is aware that the dialectic that interests him does not arise for all normative concepts. However, when he explicitly distinguishes his target, he suggests that it comprises the ‘thinnest’ normative concepts, in the sense of the distinction according to which e.g. COURAGEOUS is a thick concept, and RIGHT is thinner (for a helpful orientation, see Roberts 2017). Assume, for simplicity, an intuitive distinction between normative and descriptive contents. All normative concepts have associated normative content. Roughly, a normative concept is thick to the degree that it also has descriptive contents associated with it (accounts differ concerning how these contents are associated).

Eklund’s focus on thin concepts strikes me as a mistake. The important point for my purposes is that the normative content associated with a thick concept can be either authoritative or merely generic. For example, consider descriptions of chess moves as *devious* (usually valenced positively in discussion of chess), *elegant*, or *crushing*. These evaluations are thicker than simply calling a move ‘good,’ but the normative aspect of these evaluations are

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<sup>13</sup> McPherson 2018. The ‘generic’ locution is from Copp 2005. I previously called norms that were generically but not authoritatively normative ‘merely formally normative’ (McPherson 2011).

plausibly indexed to the constitutive aims of chess. Further, it seems plausible that COURAGEOUS may be thicker than GOOD CHESS MOVE. And yet symmetry anxieties arise more plausibly for the former than the latter, exactly because the evaluation associated with COURAGEOUS is a better candidate to be authoritative (for related discussion, see McPherson and Plunkett *forthcoming*, §3).<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2 Authoritatively Normative Properties

We can build on this clarification. We have distinguished authoritatively normative concepts from merely generically normative concepts. It is useful to make a similar distinction among normative *properties*. For example, if you are an ardent realist, and think that there are possible and non-empty authoritatively normative concepts, you will think that there are also *authoritatively normative properties* that such concepts pick out. For example, the property of being a legal chess move is a merely generically normative property, while the property of being good *simpliciter* (if there is such a property) is an authoritatively normative property.

Let's think for a moment about the contrast between authoritatively and generically normative properties. Our concept of an authoritatively normative property seems to require a kind of uniqueness not required by our concept of a generically normative. For example, if I am playing chess, it seems possible that I ought<sub>chess</sub> make a certain move, but I ought<sub>etiquette</sub> not make that move, because it would unduly embarrass my opponent. By contrast, it doesn't make sense to imagine that there are two authoritatively normative relations – ought and ought\* – such that I ought to do A, but I ought\* not to do it.

Now recall:

**Core Idea** “...reality itself favors certain ways of valuing and acting...”

It seems sufficient to satisfy Core Idea that:

- (i) certain ways of valuing and acting (perhaps: in certain contexts) bear positively valenced authoritatively normative properties,
- (ii) that no competing ways of valuing and acting bear such properties, and
- (iii) that these ways of valuing and acting do not bear further, negatively valenced authoritatively normative properties.

(I assume an ontologically significant, non-minimalist interpretation of the metaphysical terminology here.) This is my best effort to provide an informative minimal characterization of what would satisfy the ardent realist.

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<sup>14</sup> At several places in the book, Eklund makes arguments that appeal to certain phenomena concerning thick concepts and slurs. This can seem puzzling: on Eklund's official characterization, these concepts and slurs are not normative in the sense he is centrally concerned with in the book. I take it the right way to understand these arguments is often to illustrate some class of non-obvious possibility concerning thought and talk, which we are then invited to consider as applied to relevantly normative thought and talk.

The characterization is attractively minimal. For example, the claim that there are authoritatively normative properties cuts across distinctions between naturalism and non-naturalism, and between reduction and non-reduction: it says nothing about which sorts of properties (if any) are authoritatively normative.

You might have metaphysical doubts about whether there are such properties. But this is not Eklund's worry. Rather, Eklund thinks that we can grant the ardent realist all that she wants of the metaphysics. He claims that, without referential normativity, no such metaphysical assumptions suffice to vindicate ardent realism.

The most obvious way for Eklund to try to resist the appeal to authoritatively normative properties is to mount another symmetry argument. This argument would operate at the level of higher-order concepts, such as AUTHORITATIVELY NORMATIVE PROPERTY. Without drawing the contrast between authoritatively and merely generically normative properties, this is in effect what he does:

[T]he appeal to normativity... immediately simply prompts the follow-up question of what it is for a property to be normative. As it stands the appeal to normativity is just a promissory note. And if it is suggested that normativity is a primitive feature of properties, not capable of being further elucidated in independent terms, then questions arise about why having this primitive feature matters. For example, Bad Guy [i.e. the proponent of alternative normative concepts that we find objectionable] can insist that even if the property ascribed by his notion of what is right does not have this primitive feature of normativity, it is still *normative\** – and what privileges normativity over normativity\*? (9)

Because this is the sum of Eklund's reply to what I take to be the most natural strategy for the ardent realist, I am going to belabor its shortcomings.

First, consider Eklund's idea that the appeal to normativity is "just a promissory note." If one has done nothing to clarify this appeal, there is some force to this idea. However, once we have clarified the target notion of an authoritatively normative property, this complaint is misguided. It seems sufficient for the ardent realist's purposes here that there *are* such properties (and that they don't conflict in various ways etc.), *whatever* their nature. I am eager to get to the bottom of questions about the nature of authoritatively normative properties. But the question of whether *there might be* authoritatively normative properties is just a different question from the question of what their nature is. And we do not need to answer the latter question in order to answer the former question in the affirmative. Indeed, we might wind up thinking that authoritatively normative properties have a

nature, but one that is ultimately incomprehensible to creatures like us. I see no reason why one could not embrace this sort of mysterian ardent realism (however unattractive it is).<sup>15</sup>

Next, consider Eklund's question of "why having this primitive feature matters." First, as I have noted, the ardent realist can go any way on the question of whether the feature *is* primitive. I myself do not find primitivism about authoritative normativity appealing, for a variety of reasons. But consider for a moment the primitivist ardent realist. They have a clear answer to Eklund's question: *having this primitive feature is what mattering consists in!* This strikes me as what the primitivist must say, but I cannot see why this sort of constitutive claim is unacceptable in this context. Indeed, set aside *ardent* realism: plausibly, the mattering at play is a normative relation, so it is extremely natural to think that normative realists quite generally are going to appeal at the end of the day to a claim of the form: *this is what mattering consists in* (compare Schroeder 2007, Ch.3).

Finally, let's be clear about the nature of the alleged symmetry. It is not intended to be a matter of our limited epistemic capacities, or of what would persuade the proponent of some alternative normative concept. It is supposed to be a purely metaphysical matter (10). The symmetry hypothesis thus entails that an all-knowing being, able to perfectly understand all of the relevant concepts, would be able to see nothing that normatively distinguishes the way in which one class of properties favors from the way that the other class of properties favors. But the very concept of an authoritatively normative property is of a property that is objectively normatively distinguished. There is really nothing else to our grip on this useful technical notion.

This makes it clear that, applied to AUTHORITATIVELY NORMATIVE PROPERTY, the claimed symmetry just amounts to the claim that there are no authoritatively normative properties. If this is correct, there is no *symmetry* argument here. Instead, there is just a brute denial that reality contains authoritatively normative properties, disguised as a symmetry argument. But denying that such properties exist is just an old-fashioned nihilism (about authoritatively normative properties). And the normative realist already knew she had to content with *that*.

This discussion puts us in a position to reinforce the irrelevance of referential normativity, argued for in §2. Suppose that there are no authoritatively normative properties: then I cannot see how referential normativity can secure ardent realism. Suppose instead that there are authoritatively normative properties. Then ardent realism appears directly secured, independently of referential normativity.

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<sup>15</sup> The idea that the nature of authoritatively normative properties is incomprehensible to us is distinct from an important idea that Eklund considers early in CNC: that there is a reply to the alarming symmetry, but that reply is ineffable (e.g. 18-19). For we might be able to state the reply without being able to know the nature of authoritatively normative properties.

This does not mean that (meta-)semantics is irrelevant to the prospects of ardent realism. Perhaps there are no possible authoritatively normative concepts. Or perhaps the correct theory of authoritatively normative concepts is non-cognitivist, or necessarily empty, or friendly to a non-ardent view. Or perhaps the concept AUTHORITATIVELY NORMATIVE PROPERTY is defective. Etc. My point is that metasemantics does not appear to be relevant to ardent realism in the way that the Eklund's discussion suggests.

### 3.3 The priority question

If you are any conventional sort of normative realist, you will think that there are both *normative concepts* and *normative properties*. Furthermore, you will think that your normative concepts pick out normative properties. Finally, you probably don't think that it is some sort of weird accident that your normative concepts pick out *normative* properties. We might hope to explain this non-accidentality by appealing to claims that purport to illuminate the relation between normative properties and concepts. In Chapters 4 and 5, Eklund does important work exploring these relations.

The most natural way to explain the non-accidental relationship between normative properties and normative concepts is via a constitutive hypothesis linking them. Consider two schematic examples of such hypotheses:

**Concepts First**    What it is for P to be an authoritatively normative property is just for P to bear relation R to some (actual or possible) authoritatively normative concept or concepts

**Properties First**    What it is for C to be an authoritatively normative concept is just for C to bear R\* to some actual or possible authoritatively normative property or properties

These hypotheses are schematic because they are compatible with many different proposed values for R and R\* respectively. These hypotheses do not exhaust the possible explanation for why it is no accident that some normative concept picks out some normative property. But they are elegant and natural, and hence worth exploring.

The question addressed by these hypotheses is also crucial to the dialectic of this paper. To see this, consider a simple instance of Concepts First, according to which *what it is* to be an (authoritatively) normative property just is to be picked out by an (authoritatively) normative concept. And suppose that Alternative were true of authoritatively normative concepts. Then ardent realism would be false, because there would be an alarming symmetry among authoritatively normative properties. (As mentioned above, I deny this is possible.)

On the other hand, Properties First appears to be an extremely natural view to take if one is an ardent realist: the idea here is that normativity is first and foremost in the world, and only parasitically in our thought and talk. This idea was articulated in an important survey article by Steve Finlay, who writes that for the normative realist “a concept or word is normative in virtue of being about a normative part or feature of the world...” (2010, 334). This is an instance of Properties First, which offers *being about* as a hypothesis about R\*.

Unfortunately, Eklund does not frame his discussion in terms of general constitutive hypotheses like Properties First. Instead, in Chapter 4, Eklund takes up what he misleadingly calls “the” metaphysical view of the question of what makes a predicate or concept normative. According to this view, “...a predicate is positively (or negatively) normative by virtue of ascribing a property that is positively (or negatively) normative” (71). This view is (for example) suggested by the Finlay quote, above.<sup>16</sup>

Eklund convincingly refutes “the” metaphysical view. He takes the strongest of his arguments against this view to involve another imagined alien linguistic community (75). This community:

...introduces into their language a word – ‘thgir’ – with the stipulation that ‘thgir’ is to ascribe *the property that our ‘right’ ascribes*, but this community does not in any way use their word ‘thgir’ normatively (75).

As Eklund notes, it is plausible that ‘thgir’ is not a normative expression, despite the fact that it picks out a normative property.<sup>17</sup> I take this to be an excellent objection to the metaphysical view.

So much the worse for the metaphysical view. Does this provide reason to reject Properties First? One reason to think not is that there are excellent counterexamples to the metaphysical view that have nothing distinctive to do with *normative* concepts (Eklund himself discusses several of these). Consider the classic sort of example: suppose that at time *t*, Sally was thinking about rightness. The expression ‘the property Sally was thinking about at *t*’ thus picks out rightness. But this expression is surely not a normative expression. Again, this example strikes me as refuting the metaphysical view.

The problem is that one can construct Sally-style cases for pretty much any domain where one might be tempted to take Properties First quite seriously. For example, consider the *chemical* expressions, and let Sally be thinking about *being an ion* at *t*\*. The expression ‘the property Sally was thinking about

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth emphasizing that it is not clear that Finlay’s just quoted gloss states his considered view: he does not motivate its particular character, and he moves immediately from this quoted gloss to a broader gloss that suggests only that realists are committed to Properties First.

<sup>17</sup> Eklund’s ‘thgir’ is similar to Wedgwood’s android case (2007, 63) although it is put to a slightly different use.

at  $t^*$  is plausibly not a chemical expression, despite picking out a chemical property. So the metaphysical view is not true of thought and talk about chemistry.

It would be a mistake to take Properties First to be false on the basis of examples like this one. For one can easily sketch less flat-footed instances of the Properties-First schema. To drive this point home, consider a toy instance of this schema:

**Toy Theory** For a concept to count as a K concept, for a class of natural kinds K, is for it to play the right role in an actual or possible social-epistemic practice directed towards investigating and utilizing the K-aspects of reality

I don't have a theory of the mentioned "right role" to offer. But I can provide clear orienting cases. On the one hand, CONJUNCTION, while ineliminable from sensible practice in chemistry, does not play the right role in chemistry. On the other hand, both IONIC BOND and PHLOGISTON play the right role, even though the latter concept corresponds to no actual chemical substance.

Toy Theory is not intended as a fully developed proposal. It is probably subject to counterexample. It is intended only to illustrate that it is easy to find instances of Properties First that are more plausible than the metaphysical view Eklund considers.

Toy Theory handles Sally-style cases. Even if Sally is thinking about ionic bonding at time  $t$ , the expression *the property Sally was thinking about at  $t$*  does not count as a chemical expression on Toy Theory, because that expression is not apt to play the right kind of role in chemistry. It also accommodates Eklund's example of 'thgir.' This term is imagined to be used in a way that bears no relationship to the community's investigation of normative reality, and hence is not a normative expression, on Toy Theory.

Together, these points suggest that Eklund's arguments against the metaphysical view don't provide any significant reasons to reject Properties First.<sup>18</sup> It is possible that Eklund is unfriendly to Properties First because he is attracted to the view that a concept counts as normative if its possession is associated with a normative role. This might seem like a competitor to Properties First. But, I will now suggest, it is not.

To begin, I want to grant the plausibility of the idea that certain of our authoritatively normative concepts are necessarily associated with the sort of

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<sup>18</sup> Eklund makes further arguments that appeal to slurs and defective thick concepts. I have not discussed them, because – uncharacteristically of the book – I find it difficult to elegantly represent them, and (especially in the case of slurs) I find their relevance to authoritatively normative concepts opaque. To the extent that I understand them, it appears to me that a theory like Toy Theory should be able to account for them as well.

“downstream” inferential role that Eklund is concerned with.<sup>19</sup> Consider a relatively clear case, PRACTICAL OUGHT SIMPLICITER. Consider someone who judges that they practically ought to go to bed, shrugs their shoulders, and keeps surfing the ‘net. It is plausible that something has gone awry in their unresponsiveness to their own judgment. Next imagine a person who is systematically unresponsive to their first-person practical ought judgments. Such a person seems *functionally* compromised, in very roughly the same way as someone who systematically ignores their evidence in forming beliefs, or who systematically fails to add small numbers correctly. Next consider a whole linguistic community who has a term with the same extension as ‘practical ought,’ but who systematically treat facts about what falls under that term as irrelevant to their deliberation. It may seem that their term does not express an authoritatively normative concept.<sup>20</sup>

The first thing to note is that these points most clearly suggest a modal condition on normative concept possession. Such a condition might be inconsistent with the metaphysical view, but it is consistent with Properties First. Of course, even if it were *consistent* with Properties First, the normative role condition might seem to make it less plausible: you might think that normative role is alien to what you would expect to find if Properties First were true.

The force of this point can be mitigated, however, by showing that the sort of downstream inferential role mentioned above is plausibly an *incomplete* characterization of the inferential role of PRACTICAL OUGHT SIMPLICITER. As several philosophers have suggested, our normative concepts do not just have a downstream inferential role: they also have a characteristic *upstream* functional role. For example, as Michael Smith notes (in a discussion of *morality*), we are characteristically concerned to get the answers to normative questions *right* (1994, 5). This observation generalizes smoothly to authoritatively normative concepts. To see this, imagine a community that had concepts with the same downstream inferential role as ‘practical ought,’ but who treated it as a category error to deliberate about what one ought to do. (As we would ordinarily treat it as a category error for you to deliberate about whether a certain sensation you are experiencing *hurts*.) Or suppose that they took their oughtish judgments to have truth conditions, but took evidence about these truths to be irrelevant to whether to accept or abandon such a judgment. It is not clear at all that such bizarre states could count as normative judgments.

Understanding the inferential role of authoritatively normative concepts as involving both ‘downstream’ and ‘upstream’ elements makes it much

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<sup>19</sup> My (2018) argues for an account of the concept practical ought that can be understood as entailing a distinctive downstream inferential role.

<sup>20</sup> For some possible ways to resist these thoughts, see Faraci and McPherson (2017, 319-21). For an account of the concept practical ought that attempts to adequately represent its significance in deliberation, see McPherson 2018.



friendlier to Properties First. Suppose that for C to be an authoritatively normative concept is for it to play the right role in an actual or possible social-epistemic practice directed towards investigating, *and regulating our behavior by*, the authoritatively normative aspects of reality. (The italicized aspect of the proposal marks the respect in which this proposal diverges from Toy Theory.) The sort of upstream and downstream inferential role of PRACTICAL OUGHT SIMPLICITER just sketched fits neatly with this sort of account. The upstream role fits with the investigative aspect of the practice, while the downstream role fits with the regulative aspect of the practice.

The general point is this: it is agreed on all sides that normative concepts appear to have a distinctive practical role. (This is what Eklund calls “normative role” and I am calling “downstream inferential role.”) Such a role is in plain tension with what Eklund calls the “metaphysical view.” The point of the discussion just concluded is that normative concepts having such a practical role is *not* in any obvious way incompatible with Properties First – the idea that the normativity of concepts is grounded in the relation of those concepts to normative properties. This latter idea is the natural commitment for the ardent realist, and Eklund has offered no particular reason to think that the ardent realist faces special difficulties here.

#### 4. Stepping Back

In these comments, I have argued against the most significant positive thesis of *CNC*: that ardent realists must embrace referential normativity. I have argued first that referential normativity appears to do nothing to secure ardent realism, and instead serves primarily to obscure heuristics that would otherwise help us to distinguish ardent from non-ardent realists. I have then argued that we can make perfect sense of the ardent realist’s view without appeal to the idea of referential normativity, by appealing to the idea of authoritatively normative properties. I have argued further that it is natural for the ardent realist to embrace a consilient Properties First view, according to which which what it is to be a normative concept or expression to be authoritatively normative is for that concept or expression to bear the right relationship to authoritatively normative properties.

This is not to deny that there are many interesting metasemantic pressures on the ardent realist, some of which Eklund forcefully prosecutes. But it does suggest that the ardent realist can break what I have called the alarming symmetry by deploying wholly metaphysical resources.

It is worth emphasizing that I have chosen to proceed here at roughly the same high level of abstraction as Eklund does in *CNC*. As usual, the details matter, so my conclusions here are provisional. Indeed, it may well be that – once we engage properly with all of the relevant concrete details – ardent realism is a hopeless view. One of my ambitions in these comments has been to isolate what is most promising and problematic in the ardent realist’s

project, relative to Eklund's concerns. My hope is that this will contribute to the collective project of better understanding whether metaethical views of this kind are ultimately correct.

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