

# Choosing Normative Concepts - Eklund (2017)

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NYU Proseminar - 4/15/2026

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## 1. Ardent Realism

Eklund begins by giving a characterization of a kind of view on normativity he calls *Ardent Realism*.

**Broad Realism:** Normative statements are apt for mind-independent truth, and some atomic normative statements are mind-independently true.

**Ardent Realism:** Broad Realism is true, and genuine normative disagreements are not mere differences in taste, desires, languages, or concepts.

The Ardent Realist can be understood as wanting to deny all the following:

- Non-cognitivism: Normative sentences express attitudes and not beliefs about facts.
- Error Theory: All (atomic) normative statements are untrue.
- Quasi-realism: Weds deflationism about truth to traditional non-cognitivism: it is true that such-and-such things are bad whenever one has the right attitude.
- Relativism: Normative propositions cannot be absolutely true but are only true relative to a judge or a standard.
- Humeanism: For something to be a reason for an agent, this must be explained by some psychological state of the agent, such as what the agent desires
- Ought-relativity: Various oughts that in different ways are relativized to different ends or standards are all there are.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.g., there's what one morally ought to do, what one prudentially ought to do, and what one ought to do to promote such-and-such a goal, etc., and that's it.

## 2. Alternative

Say all of the above are all false. Does this satisfy the Ardent Realist? **No.** For the following may be possible:

**Alternative.** There is a linguistic community speaking a language much like English, except for the following differences. 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.

To illustrate, imagine that “good” is analytically equivalent to expressions about *happiness-maximization*. A sentence “friendship is good” would be analytically equivalent to “friendship is happiness-maximizing”.

Imagine a Bad Guy who speaks a different language from us and uses different normative concepts, but whose normative concepts are counterparts of ours. “Good” in his language is analytically equivalent to, say, expressions of *anxiety-maximization*. His actions are guided by “good” in his language in the same way that our actions are guided by “good” in our language.

We can say that the way Bad Guy acts isn’t good. But, using his own language, Bad Guy can say corresponding things about us. Using his counterpart of “good”, he can say that we fail to do “good” things. And he is correct. Bad Guy is not objectively mistaken about anything (5).<sup>2</sup>

This should trouble the Ardent Realist. But notice that this scenario is compatible with the truth of **Broad Realism**.<sup>3</sup> So it appears the Ardent Realist wants a world where scenarios like **Alternative** aren’t possible.

Let’s say that **Alternative** is possible iff it’s possible for there to be normative counterparts.

**Normative Counterparts:** Non-coextensive predicates with the same normative role (20).

## 2.1 Sameness of Normative Role?

What is it for two non-coextensive predicates to have the same normative role? Eklund leaves this vague and intuitive. Two predicates have the same normative role if they’re similarly fit to be used in practical deliberation, have similar practical consequences; and if people are disposed to act in similar correspondence to their judgements using these predicates, take considerations of these predicates to be similarly important, and so on (38).

What if we reject the very idea of sameness of normative role? Does that undermine the force of **Alternative**? Eklund thinks no. The same sorts of problems can arise:

Consider some different linguistic communities, each with its own set of normative terms, such that the normative terms of the different communities all fail to be coextensive with each other. Suppose further that it is at best unclear whether any of these terms used by the different communities have the same normative role... Again the concern arises: how should you react, knowing that while you ought to  $\varphi$ , you ought\* to  $\psi$ , where ought\* is what is expressed by one of these alternative normative terms and  $\varphi$  and  $\psi$  are incompatible courses of action? The same puzzles as before arise with respect to this question (39).

<sup>2</sup> Eklund argues that despite appearances, this can’t really be understood as Relativism: “If all that is going on is that we use ‘wrong’ in different senses, this is no more relativist than the point that a Brit and an American can point to the same thing and say ‘that is chips’ and ‘that is not chips,’ respectively, and yet **each speak the truth**...calling the supposed consequence ‘relativism’ is a bit too quick.” (35).

<sup>3</sup> Bad Guy says and believes mind-independently true normative things!

## 2.2 Moral Twin Earth

What is the relationship between **Alternative** and the classic Moral Twin Earth thought experiment?<sup>4</sup> Doesn't our MTE intuition count against the possibility of **Alternative**?

<sup>4</sup> Horgan & Timmons (1991) "New Wave Moral Realism Meets Moral Twin Earth"

I understand the original Moral Twin Earth dialectic in the following way:

**Everyone:** We're committed to philosophical naturalism.

**H&T:** Moral realism is anti-naturalistic.

**H&T:** So moral realism is false.

**Cornell:** But, on some metasemantic views, moral realism can be naturalistic!

**H&T:** But if those metasemantic views are true, Moral Twin Earth is possible.

**H&T:** But, intuitively, Moral Twin Earth is not possible.<sup>5</sup>

**H&T:** So those metasemantic views must be false.

**H&T:** So moral naturalism must be false.

**H&T:** So moral realism is anti-naturalistic after all.

**H&T:** So moral realism is false.

<sup>5</sup> For Putnam's Twin Earth, our intuition is that Earthlings and Twin Earthlings mean different things by "water". But our intuition for *Moral Twin Earth* is that they mean the same thing by "good" or by "right".

Eklund wants to make clear that he won't be relying on the intuition that Moral Twin Earth is impossible (34). He *is* committed to the idea that on some plausible metasemantic views, Moral Twin Earth (and thus *Alternative*) really is possible.

## 2.3 The Dilemma

If *Alternative* is **possible**: we're forced to choose between two options, either of which not satisfy ardent realists.

If *Alternative* is **impossible**: we end up being "metasemantically radical".

## 3. If *Alternative* is Possible

It seems there is a conflict between our (English-speaking) community and Bad Guy's. But there is a problem of how exactly to formulate what is at issue between us. For example, we cannot say the problem is about which normative terms are the "right" or "better" ones to use.

In any statement of ours about what exactly is at issue between our community and Bad Guy's (or between our concepts and our concepts' normative counterparts), our normative terms are employed, and in such a way that the question as framed "threatens to be trivially settled in favor of our terms" (23).

**Further Question:** Once it has been settled what falls under "right," "ought," etc., and what falls under "right\*", "ought\*" etc., *which normative concepts are the best ones?*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Again: this is an "unfair" way of formulating the question!

Is there, genuinely, a Further Question?

1. Yes, there is a Further Question, but it's hard to say what it is.
2. No, there is no Further Question.

Either answer seems bad for the Ardent Realist.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.1 There is no Further Question

Once it's settled what falls under our normative concepts and what falls under our normative concepts' counterparts, all questions have been answered; "there's what is 'right' in our sense and what is 'right' in their sense, and that is that" (25).

The ardent realist will not accept this "deflationary Alternative-friendly view, on which there is no Further Question" (26).<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2 There is a Further Question

There is something genuinely at issue between us and other communities; it's just that it is *ineffable* what this issue is. It's ineffable because it's impossible to express it in an "unbiased" way—to express it without using our own concepts and language.

Eklund thinks there are two issues with going the *ineffable* route. First, it retains the genuine skeptical problem. Even if we have good methodologies for getting at the truth about goodness, rightness, etc., we can't even formulate the question of whether these "are the right concepts" (25).<sup>9</sup> Second, Eklund thinks the ineffability seems implausible, since it seems we'd be able to *think* about the further question. If we can think it, why can't we express it (25-26)?<sup>10</sup>

**Sider Objection:** There *is* a further question—and it can be adequately expressed! We just need to express the question in terms of *elite* properties.<sup>11</sup>

Example: We can understand the debate between aesthetic realists and aesthetic anti-realists (who both accept that there are mind-independent truths about, say *beauty*) as a debate about whether the property *beauty* *carves nature at its joints*. Such a property is elite.<sup>12</sup>

So on the Sider Objection, we can agree that claims about what is "good", and about what is "good\*", and so on, all have objective truth values. But we can ask the Further Question, which is: is the property picked out by "good" elite?<sup>13</sup>

Eklund thinks the Sider Objection won't work. If we understand eliteness in terms of metaphysical fundamentality (or, e.g., explanatory strength (31)), it's not obvious why such a thing would be *normatively* relevant.<sup>14</sup> If instead we think of eliteness as an elucidation-resistant primitive notion, then we

<sup>7</sup> Note the affinity with this and Carnap (1950) "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology". There Carnap argues that truth-evaluable sentences only occur inside of frameworks. Inside a particular framework, we have settled syntactical and semantical rules which determine truth values for propositions that can be expressed in the language of that framework. For instance, the framework of physics supplies the truth conditions for a sentence like "there are electrons"—which say that this sentence is trivially true. But philosophers ask whether electrons *really* exist, independently of any framework. Carnap argues that this is nonsensical; things can only be true or false (and thus meaningful) *within* a framework. These "external questions" that philosophers try to ask are thus nonsense. We could understand the Further Question here as a Carnapian "external question".

<sup>8</sup> I am not sure what he means by "deflationary" here, I thought deflationary had something to do with truth.

<sup>9</sup> But that's just an epistemic problem (albeit a big one). Does the ardent realist further demand that we already have a grasp on the "correct" concepts?

<sup>10</sup> I found these responses to the ineffability line to be underdeveloped.

<sup>11</sup> Sider (2009)

<sup>12</sup> Intuitively: blue is elite; grue is not elite.

<sup>13</sup> There is a related idea that elite properties are also *reference magnets*, which is the idea that what is elite is more intrinsically eligible to be meant. You could use this idea to try and argue that **Alternative** is not in fact possible. Eklund does not think this is a good strategy (29).

<sup>14</sup> Seems related to the "absence of value" problem in Dasgupta (2018).

have no way of arguing about which normative counterparts are more elite (30).

### 3.3 Summary: If Alternative is Possible

1. If Alternative is possible, then either there's a Further Question, or there isn't.
2. If there *is*, then it's ineffable (which is counterintuitive and gives us skepticism).
3. If there is *not*, then we have an anti-ardent-realism deflationism.
4. So, either way: if Alternative is possible, the ardent realist is not happy.

### 4. If Alternative is Impossible

There's intuitive sense to the thought that **Alternative** is impossible. When we imagine a community like those on Moral Twin Earth, our reaction is that we and the Twin-Earthlings actually mean the same things by "good", etc. (20). However, saying Alternative is impossible is to reject some popular and plausible metasemantic theories. We'll thus have to be *metasemantically radical* (43), and reject metasemantics such as...

1. **Causal Normative Metasemantics:** Normative predicates have their reference determined by what their use is appropriately causally linked to, analogously to how natural kind terms standardly are held to have their reference determined (20).<sup>15</sup>

Ethan's example: A community applies the word "good" to certain actions, people, states of affairs, etc. Just like they applied "water" to clear drinkable liquid and ended up picking out the chemical natural kind  $H_2O$  (without knowing about  $H_2O$ ), the community succeeds at picking out some natural kind, e.g. *pleasure activation in the brain*, without knowing it.<sup>16</sup>

It's pretty clear that causal links come apart from normative role; so terms can be causally linked to different properties even while they have the same normative role (20). In our example, things could have gone differently, and "good" could have picked out *happiness activation in the brain*, while still playing the same normative role.

So, if Causal Normative Metasemantics is true, then normative counterparts are possible. So, if **Alternative** is impossible, then Causal Normative Metasemantics is false.<sup>17</sup>

2. **Descriptivist Normative Metasemantics:** The reference of expressions is determined by associated theories. The referent of the expression is what makes the theory true (21).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> He calls it "Causal Normative Semantics" but it's more accurate to call this a metasemantics.

<sup>16</sup> I know *pleasure activation in the brain* is probably more like a functional kind but let's just not worry about that.

<sup>17</sup> Eklund doesn't actually make an argument for why I should care whether Causal Normative Metasemantics is true or false. I take it it's a popular theory, but he assumes we're already motivated to care about it.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson (1998)

In the case of scientific terminology, terms are introduced in the context of scientific theories, where they are given very specific roles within the theory. Ethan example: physicists introduce the term “electron” for *whatever it is that has negative charge, N mass, orbits nuclei, and so on*. In the case of folk concepts and terminology, there is a kind of *folk theory* that says “good” stands for *whatever it is that ought to be promoted, which is true of friendship, of promises, of certain people, and so on*.

But, again, it seems descriptive position in folk morality can come apart from normative role; so terms can be have different descriptive links while having the same normative role (21).

So, if Descriptivist Normative Metasemantics is true, then normative counterparts are possible. So, if **Alternative** is impossible, then Descriptivist Normative Metasemantics is false.

#### 4.1 An Alternative-unfriendly Metasemantics?

Perhaps we can turn to a model on which it’s a concept’s normative role which does the reference-determining. Let’s understand this as a kind of Normative Role Metasemantics.

**Normative Role Metasemantics (Wedgwood):** Every predicate with the same normative role has the same reference (40).

We can compare this to conceptual role metasemantics for logical connectives. If we characterize “&”’s meaning to be set by the standard introduction and elimination rules, this then determines its reference to be the operation *conjunction*. If we characterize “good”’s meaning to be set by some sort of strict (normative?) rule, this also determines the referent which fits the rule.<sup>19</sup>

This seems the only reasonable way for the ardent realist to get what they want (42). Imagine Bad Guy again. If the normative role determines reference, then we’ve rules out the possibility that Bad Guy’s normative terms play the same role as ours, but refer to different things.

The issue, as Eklund sees it, is that while conceptual role metasemantics of the descriptive kind is “commonplace”, it’s quite radical to think that *normative* role can determine reference (43). To agree with Causal Normative Metasemantics or Descriptivist Normative Metasemantics is to say (very plausibly) that normative terms get their reference in the same way as our other terms. To posit Normative Role Metasemantics is say that some terms get their reference one way, and other terms get their reference another way.

<sup>19</sup> I started to write out Wedgwood’s rule for the basic action-guiding predicate but then I got very confused (40). Can we talk about this?