

New Essays on Normative Realism

Paul Boghossian (ed.), Christopher Peacocke (ed.)

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CHAPTER

8 Minimalism, Alternative Normative Concepts and Normative Realism

Paul Boghossian

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Abstract

In this chapter I defend the claim that the meanings of central normative terms are Minimal in the sense that they consist merely in their characteristic normative roles and contain no substantive information about their extensions. My argument relies on the use of alternative normative concepts. I contrast my use of such concepts with the use recently made of them by some writers to undermine our grip on the idea of normative realism. I argue that that this latter use is ineffective: it ignores the fundamental fact that we cannot step outside of our most basic normative concept in order to raise a question about their correctness. I close by briefly examining whether we should invoke the idea of 'joint-carving' properties in the normative domain.

Keywords: analyticity, synthetic a priori, normative concepts, normative roles, alternative normative concepts, open- question argument, semantic solutions, normative realism, Eklund

Subject: Epistemology, Moral Philosophy, Philosophy of Mathematics and Logic

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1 Introduction

Suppose that, like me, you believe that apriority and analyticity remain important philosophical concepts. As a result, you will face the question: Are all a priori truths analytic? Once the ingredient notions are sufficiently clarified, I believe that the answer to this question is 'no.' In particular, I believe that substantive *normative* principles, while a priori, are not analytic. Call that *the Claim.*

Several philosophers have been tempted to endorse the Claim in connection with the special case of *moral* principles, for example G. E. Moore (1903) and Derek Parfit (2011). I believe they were right, although it's not

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clear how strong a case they were able to make for it or to what extent their arguments have commanded acceptance. Here I will see whether we can improve on their efforts.

If true, the Claim would have at least three interesting consequences. First, it would imply that basic normative concepts are *Minimalist* in nature: you can fully grasp them without having to commit yourself to any particular view about what falls in their extensions. Second, this Minimalism would in turn imply that we won't be able to explain our a priori knowledge of normative principles just by invoking our *understanding* of them. Third, the Claim, and elements of the argument for it, can be used to show the weakness in recent attempts to establish that we don't really understand what we mean by 'normative realism.' In this chapter, I will look at the first and third of these consequences, leaving the second for another occasion.

2 The Claim: Preliminaries

Let's start with a rough version of the Claim. I will focus at first on moral principles, coming later to epistemic ones:

> (The Claim) All substantive moral principles are synthetic a priori.

p. 164 By a 'substantive' moral principle, I mean a statement of the form:

> (DtoG) For any x, if x is D, then x is G (in virtue of being D).

where 'D' is a clearly descriptive term and 'G' is a clearly normative moral term. (I will tend to drop the 'in virtue of' clause in discussion, since nothing will hang on it in this context.)

What is the distinction between a normative expression and a descriptive one? This is a notoriously vexed question. It's hard to see how to say anything substantive about what makes a term *normative* as opposed to descriptive. We could try saying, correctly, that a descriptive expression may be used in stating facts or describing the state of the world; but we would be begging the question against the normative realist if we also said that no normative expression could be so used. We could try saying, correctly, that a normative expression may be used to commend, praise, or prescribe (or criticize, denigrate, or proscribe); but we would be begging the question against the analytical naturalist, who believes that such normative expressions can be analyzed in descriptive terms, if we also said that no descriptive expression could be so used. At the end of the day, there appears to be no alternative but to assume that we have a list of recognizably canonical normative terms and set our questions with that assumption in place.[1] A commonly agreed-on version of such a list would contain the terms:

> 'ought,' 'should,' 'good,' 'bad,' 'right,' 'wrong,' 'correct,' and 'incorrect.'

3 Normative Roles

Consider the familiar chestnut:

> (NoAbuse) It's wrong to inflict recreational suffering.

Let 'wrong' here mean 'morally wrong.' In making this judgment, the thinker *prescribes* not inflicting purely recreational suffering. How is that prescriptive function of the judgment accomplished?

A very natural thought, familiar from discussions both of judgment internalism and of expressivist views, is that it consists in the *downstream* consequences of making the judgment. We could say, for example: to judge

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p. 165 that inflicting recreational suffering is wrong is to be *committed* to criticizing someone who did it, ↳ feeling negative emotions towards them, blaming them, feeling guilty if one oneself did it, and so forth. (There is a descriptive (though still non-reductive) version of such a view in which 'is to be disposed' replaces 'is to be committed.') On such a view, someone judging NoAbuse would convey, at least in part, that inflicting recreational suffering deserves to have that kind of place in our normative discussions, deliberations, motivations, and emotions.[2]

A familiar, if not incontestable, way of capturing these downstream consequences of judging NoAbuse is to attribute them to an aspect of the *conceptual role* of 'wrong,' which we may call its *normative role*. The idea is that the concept *wrong* is at least partly specified by being governed by the following kind of elimination-rule: If you judge that x is wrong, you are committed to giving x a certain kind of role in your thinking and motivation. Needless to say, there are many variants on this basic idea—I won't be trying to decide between them here. I will rest content with this very rough characterization.

Appropriate normative roles of a similar nature could be described for some of the other canonical normative expressions. For example, the normative role of

> p is epistemically justified

might be given by a link between making the judgment and being committed to believing p, relying on it in reasoning and praising it in normative discussion.

Two points bear emphasis. First, none of this meant to amount to a *reductive* characterization of normative concepts in terms of descriptive ones. Second, although some of this work on normative roles comes from non-cognitivists about the normative, the view itself is perfectly compatible with a realist, cognitivist view, according to which normative judgments are capable of being true or false.

4 The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction and Competent Doubt

What is an analytic sentence? On my view, we need to distinguish sharply between two different notions that have gone under the name (see Boghossian 1996; 2020):

> *Metaphysical Analyticity (MA)*: S is metaphysically analytic iff S is true merely in virtue of its meaning (and without any contribution from 'the facts').

and

p. 166
> *Epistemic Analyticity (EA)*: S is epistemically analytic iff it is possible for someone to be *justified* in believing S merely in virtue of understanding S.

As I've explained elsewhere (1996), the notion of Metaphysical Analyticity is both of dubious coherence and of dubious explanatory value. Even the simplest sentence—'Copper is copper' for example—can be said to be true partly in virtue of its meaning and partly in virtue of the relevant fact (in this case, that everything is self-identical). The idea of '*truth* purely in virtue of meaning' is confused.

By contrast, the notion of epistemic analyticity can be shown to play an important and independent role in the theory of a priori knowledge: it is needed to account for the many clear-cut cases of sentences that can be justifiably believed merely in virtue of being understood. Here are a few examples:

> If P, then P.

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> All squares have four sides.
>
> If A entails B and B entails C, then A entails C.
>
> A simple quadrilateral's interior angles add up to 360 degrees.

So, the question before us is not whether substantive moral principles are metaphysically analytic, but only whether they are *epistemically* analytic.

The most famous attempt to prove that substantive moral principles are not epistemically analytic was, of course, Moore's. His argument focused on a particular example, and then sought to generalize it.

> (Pleasure) If x is a pleasant experience, then x is good.

'Pleasant' here is a descriptive condition, phenomenologically individuated. 'Good' is used in its moral sense and is merely pro tanto: a given pleasure may be good pro tanto, but bad all things considered. In picking Pleasure as his prime example, Moore fell in with a tradition of thinking that the best candidate for being an analytic moral principle is either something like the claim that pleasure is good or the claim that pain is bad. Thus, if he could show that even those principles are not analytic, the Claim would have been made abductively plausible: the best candidates for having analytic status would not have qualified.

To show that Pleasure is not analytic, Moore argued (or so an improved and strengthened version of his argument would have it) that it is possible for a thinker to competently doubt Pleasure: that is to say, that it is possible for there to be a thinker who fully understood Pleasure to consider as open the question whether an experience's being pleasant was sufficient for its pro tanto moral goodness, even after reflection. As a result, he concluded that Pleasure was synthetic.

There are two big problems with Moore's argument. The first is that Pleasure may be competently doubtable
p. 167 not only because it's synthetic but because it's not ↳ even true. To focus more tightly on the issue of analyticity, we would do better to pick an example that no sane person would doubt, for example, NoAbuse. Pretty much every sane person would agree that NoAbuse is true (although I did once encounter a distinguished academic who wanted to know how much recreational pleasure was at issue).

The second big problem with Moore's argument can't be overcome by switching example, for it stems from a failure to make an important distinction in the theory of the epistemically analytic—namely, between the Constitutively Analytic and the Basis Analytic.

When a sentence S is constitutively analytic, that means that being disposed to assent to S is a condition of understanding S. Arguably, both (i) and (ii) above are examples of the constitutively analytic; and that's one way in which a sentence may be justifiably believed just by being understood (for the details, see the references cited above).

But that's not the only way in which a sentence can be epistemically analytic. Sometimes S is epistemically analytic not because assenting to S *constitutes* your understanding of S but because S's truth can be worked out on the *basis* of that understanding. That's Basis Analyticity. Arguably, (iii) and (iv) are examples of that. Thus, you don't need to assent to the claim about the sum of the interior angles of a quadrilateral in order to have the concept quadrilateral; but you can work out that it's true from your understanding of the ingredient concepts.

Now, Moore's problem is that while your ability to doubt S is a good way of showing that S is not constitutively analytic, it's not a good way of showing that it's not basis analytic. A sentence S can be basis analytic while being highly unobvious. For example, for all I know, Andrew Wiles's proof of Fermat's Last Theorem draws only on his understanding of the various ingredient notions. Yet both the theorem and its proof are highly

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unobvious. In the case of such a complex entailment, it would be entirely possible for a fully competent and rational person to doubt the validity of the entailment, even as it's both valid and analytic.

Admittedly, neither Pleasure nor NoAbuse look quite as complex as FLT. Still, there's no getting around the fact that the ability to doubt S is not a reliable guide to whether S is basis analytic and so not a reliable guide to its analytic status. And that's why Moore's argument fails. Can we do better than Moore? In the next section, I explore a different style of argument for the Claim.

5 Minimalism and the Argument from Alternative Normative Concepts

As we saw previously, the *core* of a thin normative term is its *normative role*, a role which enables it to carry out its function as a prescriptive expression. Having such a role is essential to anything properly regarded as a normative term.

p. 168 Now, a normative role, so construed, does not per se carry any information about what falls under it—of what's deserving of engaging our motivations, of being praised in normative discussion, and of causing positive emotions in us when it's realized. It is simply a role which, as far as it's concerned, could be intelligibly applied to anything, however plausibly or implausibly. Nothing in the nature or character of this role prevents it from being used to make outrageously false moral claims—for example, that it is not wrong to cause recreational suffering.

Obviously, then, if a proposition like NoAbuse is to be epistemically analytic, its central normative term, 'wrong,' must consist not merely of this normative role, which in and of itself leaves wide open the question of which particular act-types fall under its extension; it must also contain a *substantive* conception of which act-types are wrong. In particular, it must, either directly or indirectly, include the information that inflicting pain on a person just for one's own amusement is wrong, so that someone who understood NoAbuse would be able to see that it is true simply by reflecting on its ingredient concepts and the way they are put together. Let's call any moral concept that incorporates a view about which acts or traits fall under its extension a *Loaded* moral concept. By way of contrast, I will designate any moral concept that consists merely in its normative role a *Minimal* moral concept.

Thus, our question about the Claim is in effect a question about whether our basic, thin moral concepts are Minimal or Loaded. How can we decide this question? To see why it's plausible that they are Minimal, suppose that, for the sake of argument, we concede that NoAbuse is analytic of the ordinary notion of 'wrong.' At this point, a skeptic might well press the following question:

> (Moral Skeptic's Speech) I grant that NoAbuse is analytic of your concept of 'wrong.' But there is an alternative concept of 'wrong' relative to which NoAbuse is not analytic. Call this alternative concept of 'wrong' *wrong** to keep it distinct. I don't say that NoAbuse is necessarily false when formulated with wrong*, just that wrong* does not in and of itself speak to the issue. It leaves it open. Why should we prefer to use a concept of 'wrong' that forecloses on the question of the truth of NoAbuse rather than one that leaves it open and settles its truth by substantive means?

What does the Skeptic mean by saying that wrong* is an alternative concept of 'wrong'?—the claim sounds ungrammatical. What she means, of course, is that wrong* has the same *normative role* as wrong—it plays the same role in normative discussion, motivation, and emotional reactions as wrong does—but differs from it in not analytically incorporating the substantive doctrine of NoAbuse. Wrong*'s sharing its normative role with 'wrong' is what qualifies it as a concept of 'wrong,' as opposed to being a total change of subject.

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p. 169 The fact that we understand the Skeptic's question, and feel that it deserves a substantive answer, shows that our basic, thin moral concepts are Minimal; or that, if they're not, they might just as well be without the loss of anything that really matters to us. For what we are evincing, when we allow that wrong* could equally well count as a concept of 'wrong,' so long as it shares wrong's normative role, is that what really matters to us about this concept is this normative role. It's the normative role that's essential to the concept, and not any associated doctrine. That is why we feel that the fact that wrong* strips out what most would regard as a true moral principle—namely, NoAbuse—does not disqualify it from counting as a legitimate moral concept, one that can play exactly the same normative role as 'wrong.' (Compare stripping out of the concept expressed by 'bachelor' that bachelors are male or unmarried: here no one would think that the subject matter has remained the same.)

Moore thought that he needed to prove that our ordinary moral terms left all substantive moral claims analytically open. He had difficulty proving this both because the open question test is an inconclusive test for the absence of analyticity and because it is hard to see how to secure the relevant generality.

My alternative strategy is to concede that our ordinary moral terms are Loaded and to ask what we would miss if we replaced them with their Minimal counterparts, with concepts that replicated the crucial normative roles of the original concepts but left the substantive moral claims to be established substantively. The answer appears to be that we would not be leaving out anything essential at all.

So far, I've been conducting the discussion in terms of moral concepts. But we can see the very same dialectic at work in epistemology. A principle that has the same solid status in epistemology as NoAbuse has in morality would be the rule of Enumerative Induction, which we may characterize very roughly as follows:

> (EI): If a sufficiently large number of F's have been observed and all have been G, then you are prima facie justified in believing that the next F will also be G.

The skeptic asks for some justification to believe that this principle is sound. And, of course, we are all familiar with the difficulty of providing such a justification, and with the surprisingly strong prima facie case that can be made for the claim that no such justification will ever be forthcoming.

Suppose we respond to the inductive skeptic, in the way that some ordinary-language philosophers tried to do in the 1950s, by saying that Enumerative Induction doesn't need any substantive justification because it is analytic: reasoning in this way is simply part of what we mean by 'justified reasoning.' Here, too, we can imagine the skeptic responding as follows:

> (Epistemic Skeptic's Speech) I grant that EI is analytic of your concept of 'justification.' But there is an
> p. 170 alternative concept of 'justification' on which EI is not ↳ analytic. Call this alternative concept of 'justification' *justification** to keep it distinct. I don't say that EI is necessarily false when formulated with justification*, just that justification* does not in and of itself speak to the issue. It leaves it open. Why should we prefer to use a concept of 'justification' that forecloses on the question of the truth of EI, rather than leave it open and settle its truth by substantive means?

The fact that we understand the Skeptic's Question, and feel that it deserves a substantive answer, shows that our basic epistemic concepts are Minimal; or that, if they're not, they might just as well be without loss of anything that really matters to us. For what we are evincing when we allow that justification* could equally well count as a concept of 'justification,' so long as it shares justification's normative role, is that what really matters to us is this normative role. That is why we feel that the fact that justification* strips out what most would regard as an unquestionably true epistemic principle—namely, Enumerative Induction—does not disqualify it from counting as a legitimate epistemic concept that can play exactly the same normative role as 'justification.'

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If these considerations are right, they show that our basic normative concepts are minimal, or that, if they're not, they may as well be, without the loss of what really matters to us. What we care about is whether something deserves to have a certain place in our thinking, motivation, and so forth; and the freer we are in asking whether something deserves that role, the better served will be our purpose in having such a concept.

If all this is right, the Claim is true: basic normative concepts are (or may as well be) Minimal and substantive normative principles are (or may as well be) synthetic a priori.

6 Alternative Normative Concepts and Normative Realism

I have used the possibility of alternative normative concepts to support my claim that our basic normative concepts are Minimal, and hence that basic normative principles, when true, are not analytic. In the recent metaethics literature, the possibility of alternative normative concepts has been used for a different purpose, to show that our standard understanding of what it would be to be a *Realist* about normative facts is defective. In this section, I would like to explain why this *other* use of alternative concepts is not persuasive.

The argument against the standard construal of Realism that I have in mind is pursued with great ingenuity and originality by Matti Eklund in his (2017) book, *Choosing Normative Concepts*. Eklund correctly characterizes the impulse behind Realism as consisting in the view that 'reality itself favors certain ways of valuing or
p. 171 acting.' He calls this view 'Ardent Realism.' Its core import is that disagreements ↳ about value have an objective adjudication, and aren't just a matter of diverging tastes.

Traditionally, the question about objective adjudication has been pursued by asking whether what Eklund labels Standard Realism' is true, where Standard Realism is the familiar view that:

(I) Fundamental moral principles, such as (NoAbuse), are capable of truth and falsity.

(II) Some such principles are true.

(III) And those that are true are made true by mind-independent facts.

Eklund's crucial contention is that the question of objective adjudication can't be pursued merely by asking whether Standard Realism is true because of the possibility of alternative normative concepts, a possibility he describes as follows:

> *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. (Eklund 2017: 18)

Once again, let's mark their concepts with an asterisk to distinguish theirs from ours. Three points are crucial to Eklund's use of Alternative as an argument against Standard Realism. First, the normative roles of, for example, wrong and wrong* are exactly the same. Second, wrong and wrong* are not coextensive; while it may be wrong to inflict pain on a person just for fun, it may not be wrong*. This is not just a matter of the two communities having divergent views about what falls in the extensions of these terms; it's that the extensions of the two expressions are genuinely distinct. Finally, from our point of view, their judgments about what is 'right*' and 'wrong*' are repugnant to us: they are bad guys.

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If we grant all this, it seems fairly easy to see why Standard Realism would be in trouble. Given that Alternative is possible, we could have two communities, each with its own set of normative concepts, but with different extensions, so that the terms are respectively true of different acts or objects. The two communities may be judging correctly *relative* to their *own* sets of basic normative concepts, while disagreeing with one another. However, Standard Realism has no resources with which to prefer one of these sets of judgments over the other,
p. 172 since it has no resources with which to adjudicate between these competing sets of normative ↳ concepts, ruling one of them correct and the other incorrect. By assumption, both sets of judgments are true. Hence, Standard Realism cannot capture the impulse behind Ardent Realism. Thus, in the presence of the claim that Alternative is possible, Standard Realism is not realism enough. More alarmingly, it's not clear what intelligible possibility would vindicate the thought behind objective adjudication. For what intelligible clause should we add to Standard Realism to ensure that it does justice to the notion of objective adjudication?

Since the stakes are high, we should ask whether Eklund's argument works.

7 Does the Argument Work?

Notice that Eklund's alternative concepts are different from mine. My alternatives differed from one another in *what they counted as analytic*, though *not necessarily in their extensions*. It's essential to Eklund's use of his alternative concepts that, while these concepts have the same normative roles as ours, they have different extensions.

Earlier I said that Eklund's argument depends on being able to claim that all three of the following propositions may be true together: (i) *wrong* and *wrong** have the same normative roles, (ii) they have different extensions, and (iii) the views of the *wrong** users are in conflict with ours (repugnant to us). The first problem with Eklund's argument is that it's not at all clear how all three of these propositions can be true together. In particular, it's not how clear it could turn out that (iii) can be true if both (i) and (ii) are also true.

The argument for this is fairly straightforward. There are basically two options for how to individuate the concepts at issue: either *wrong* and *wrong** are individuated *solely* in terms of their normative roles, or they are individuated in terms *both* of their normative roles and of their extensions. If the concepts are individuated in terms of both their normative roles *and* their extensions, then *wrong* and *wrong** are *distinct* concepts and there is, therefore, no guarantee that our judgments will be in conflict with theirs. On the other hand, if the concepts are individuated solely in terms of their narrow normative roles, *wrong* and *wrong** will be the same concept, but there will still be no way to secure the claim that the respective judgments are incompatible with one another. On the narrow individuation, 'This is wrong' and 'This is not wrong*' need be no more in conflict with one another than 'It's hot here' and 'It's not hot here,' said by different people at different locations. So, no matter which way the concepts are individuated, there seems no good way to secure the key claim that the alternative community *disagrees* with us. That already is a pretty severe blow to Eklund's argument.

The second challenge faced by Eklund's argument is to come up with a convincing answer to the question: How could two normative concepts which share a normative role have different extensions? Clearly, the thought
p. 173 would have to be ↳ that this normative role isn't sufficient to determine what lies in the extension of these normative terms. Let's follow Eklund in following the thesis that the normative role of a normative term *is* sufficient to determine its reference the thesis of 'Referential Normativity.'

To suppose that Referential Normativity is false is to assume that the correct theory of reference for such terms must appeal to some *further* factor, in addition to their normative roles, in order to fix their extensions. What could such a further factor be? Two possibilities are salient from the extensive literature on the theory of reference and are alluded to by Eklund: causal connections to the environment, or associated sets of platitudes, as on the so-called Canberra view, with the reference determined by fit with these associated descriptions.

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The former idea construes normative terms on the model of natural kind terms. Just as 'water' gets its reference not solely in virtue of fit with its associated conceptual role but also in virtue of what it is causally connected to in the context of acquisition, so 'morally good' gets its extension in virtue of what it is causally connected to in the context in which it is acquired. If this view were true, moral concepts would be just as Twin-Earthable as natural-kind concepts are. But it is patently absurd to suppose that they are, as an extensive literature has persuasively shown (see e.g. Horgan and Timmons 1991). (That literature is primarily geared toward attacking a type of moral realism—namely, Cornell-style naturalistic moral realism—but its insights can be adapted to my purposes.)

The Canberra view is incompatible with Minimalism. Although some proponents of the Canberra view emphasize that the platitudes are not to be thought of as *analytic*, they might just as well be, for present purposes. Even if they are thought of as mere reference-fixers, and not as specifying the concept, the principles involved, or at least a significant number of them, would count as truths you know a priori just in virtue of grasping the concept (compare Kripke's famous discussion of the term 'meter'). And that, as I've argued, is incompatible with Minimalism.

So, there is a very real question, it seems to me, whether Alternative is genuinely possible. And if it isn't, Eklund's argument can't so much as get off the ground.

8 Can We Accept No Privilege?

However, let's grant for the sake of argument that Alternative is possible, and thus that Referential Normativity is false. I want to argue that even if we conceded all of this, Eklund's style of argument from alternative normative concepts cannot be used to raise a problem for Standard Realism.

A crucial component of the relevant argument is what we may call the thesis of

> (No Privilege): if we were to be confronted by two sets of moral concepts, illustrated by *wrong* and *wrong**, which shared their conceptual roles but had divergent ↳ extensions, there would be no facts about which set of concepts it would be *correct* for us to use, which ones we *ought* to use.

This claim is crucial to securing the conclusion that Standard Realism is an inadequate expression of objective adjudication (or Ardent Realism). But there's a serious difficulty, it seems to me, seeing how No Privilege could ever be a proposition that we could rationally *accept.*

The difficulty stems from the fact that, as its formulation clearly indicates, No Privilege is itself a *normative* reply to a *normative* question. So, for that question to be a real question, the normative vocabulary with which it is formulated will have to be assumed to be in good standing.

Now, any philosopher (such as Nagel 1997 or Dworkin 1996) who maintains that all metaethical claims have first-order moral implications will think that the question which moral concept we ought to use is not only a normative question but is itself a *moral* question. On this view, the claim of No Privilege would become:

> (No Privilege*): if we were to be confronted by two sets of moral concepts, illustrated by *wrong* and *wrong**, which shared their conceptual roles but had divergent extensions, there would be no facts about which set of concepts it would be *morally correct* for us to use, which ones we *morally ought* to use.

But it is very hard to make sense of this. By assumption, 'morally correct' and 'morally ought' are in good standing—otherwise they could not be used to formulate the question to which No Privilege is supposed to be the answer. But from the standpoint of these concepts, the starred concepts, with their divergent and

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rebarbative extensions, incorporate serious mistakes about what we ought to do. How could anyone employing these concepts also coherently maintain that there are no facts about whether the unstarred concepts are better than the starred ones? It doesn't make sense.

Nor would this problem go away if we insisted, against Dworkin and Nagel, that metaethics is independent of ethics and thus that the question which moral concept to use is not necessarily a *moral* question. Let's say that it is an epistemic question: Which concept are we *epistemically* justified in believing is the better option?

With this adjustment, it now becomes hard to see how to raise an interesting question about whether it would be epistemically better for us to use 'epistemically justified' or 'epistemically justified*,' where 'epistemically justified*' is normatively just like 'epistemically justified' except that it has a different extension. By assumption, 'epistemically justified*' gets some things wrong from the standpoint of our standard notion of epistemic justification: It recommends giving certain claims a privileged place in our thinking and deliberating which, from the standpoint of our current normative framework, don't deserve such a place. How could it then
p. 175 rule against itself in any confrontation with 'epistemically justified*'? And, ↳ presumably, our ordinary concept of epistemic justification would favor using our standard moral concepts over the starred alternatives.

At this point in the dialectic, we are usually told something like this: Yes, their starred concept looks mistaken from *your* standpoint; but your unstarred concept looks mistaken from *their* standpoint. There is a perfect symmetry here. *You have failed to provide a reason to prefer your concept over the starred alternative*.

But this again is misleading. I have, indeed, given you a *reason* to prefer our concept over the starred one. What I may not have given you is a *shmeason* to prefer our concept over the starred one, where a shmeason is just like a reason except . . . But why should I give you a shmeason to prefer our concept to the starred one when, from my point of view, shmeasons incorporate mistakes about what one has reason to believe? And so round and round we go.

It does seem to me that, concerning our most fundamental normative concepts—the ones that we would need to use to raise the very fundamental questions being raised here—there is no good way to raise a question about their correctness. We can't be rationally talked out of them, even if Referential Normativity is false.

Eklund writes as though it's a problem for the Ardent Realist that he will have difficulty giving expression to his view that one of these normative concepts is to be preferred over the others—for which normative vocabulary should he use with which to express his Ardent Realism?

But this problem of potential ineffability is much more of a problem for Eklund's skeptical argument than for the Realist: If you can't coherently state a problem, what's there to worry about?[3]

9 What Does this Difficulty with No Privilege Show?

What is the significance of the fact that, concerning our most basic normative concepts, we can't raise a substantive question about their correctness? Does it show us something deep about the role of the normative in structuring and framing all inquiry, including inquiry into normative matters? Or is it just a pragmatic
p. 176 problem ↳ akin to not being able to say without self-refutation, 'No one knows anything,' while it might still be true that no one knows anything?

My own inclination is to say that it shows us something deep. Since the question whether to try to change our basic normative concepts is only interesting as a question about whether it's *rational* to change them, and since that is a normative question already structured by our existing normative concepts, it's not surprising that there will be limits to the extent to which we are able to raise a rational question about those very concepts.

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But someone may still be plagued by the following thought. We have become used to thinking that *non-normative* reality has *joints*, privileged properties in terms of which reality comes prepackaged. Why should we not suppose that normative reality, too, has joints, elite normative properties that are the ones with true normative authority? If we make this assumption, there will then be a real question whether our current concepts are more joint-carving than these alternative ones which we have conceded (at least for the purposes of argument) are out there. And if that's so, we would understand what it would be for some normative concepts to be more *objectively correct* than others, even if we cannot be rationally talked out of ours. What satisfaction can we derive from not being able to raise a question that, objectively, ought to be raised? Let me turn, then, to asking what it might mean for normative reality to have joints.

10 Joints in Normative Reality?

The idea that there are objectively correct concepts is most at home in non-normative domains, so let's look first at how it plays out there. Why do we need a conception of the objective correctness of a non-normative concept, as opposed to the objective correctness of a claim made using that concept? In the literature, we can discern an argument from below and an argument from above.

The argument from below is that there seem to be intuitively powerful examples of concepts that differ in the objectivity of their correctness, or fit, as I shall sometimes also say. To use an example of Shamik Dasgupta's (2025), the concept of offside, as used in soccer, is subjective in that its fitness cannot be explained without alluding to various features about *us* and our desire to have a certain kind of game. If some other community found it useful to have a different offside rule, they would not be making a mistake.

> (Subjective Concept Correctness) A concept C is subjective if the explanation of its correctness would have to advert to the features of those who use it.

Notice, of course, that this notion of a concept's objective correctness is not the concept of *being true of*, or
p. 177 *correctly applying to*, something. A player is offside when ↳ there is a certain arrangement of players and ball on the field; it's not determined by anyone's say-so, not even the referee's. So, in that sense, facts about offsides are mind-independent. They are only subjective in this other, more elusive sense.

By intended contrast, the concept of *electron* is not like that: Its fitness is supposedly more objective. In the usual gloss, it's correct because it carves the world at its natural joints. The suggestion then is that if *electron* were joint-carving, we would be able to explain the fitness of *electron* without alluding to anything about us: the concept would just fit.

> (Objective Concept Correctness) A concept C is objective if the explanation of its correctness would not have to advert to any features of those who use it.

That's the argument from below. The argument from above is that this notion of the objective correctness of a concept is needed if we are to make sense of an idea that lies at the root of all notions of realism worthy of the name—the idea of *Reality-as-it-is-in-itself* , or RAIIII. And we can readily see the connection: A conception of reality as it is in itself should carry no trace of us. If, however, all our concepts were such that an explanation of why it is fit to apply them would have to allude to us, then we could never attain a conception of RAIIII. Thus, if this notion is to make sense, we must be able to make sense of objectively correct concepts.

There are many things to say about this line of thought, most of which I won't say in this chapter. For present purposes, the key point is this: if this is the right way to think about reality having joints, it's very unlikely to apply to the normative domain. For it's not plausible that we will be able to explain the fitness of our *moral* concepts, for example, without adverting to facts that are tied to consciousness: to suffering, pleasure, or the

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moral emotions. It is also not plausible that we should be able to explain the fitness of our using *epistemic* concepts—such as 'is epistemically justified'—without recourse to facts that are tied to consciousness: to the phenomenological features of perception, introspective access to one's evidence and so forth. (This may betray my sympathy for *internalist* notions of justification, but there's nothing wrong with being sympathetic to a true view.)

The upshot is that the idea of joint-carving properties, as that idea has been developed in non-normative domains, can't help us get any purchase on that idea in the normative domain.

11 Conclusion

Standard construals of normative realism don't raise questions about the correctness of our basic normative concepts; they are only concerned to show that claims made using those concepts can be objectively true.

p. 178 Inspired by thinking in non-normative domains, philosophers have been raising questions about whether these standard construals of normative realism can be adequate if they don't address the question of concept correctness.

In pursuing this line of thought, these philosophers run into various obstacles. The first is that our basic normative concepts are Minimal: that is, they do not incorporate substantive doctrines about what falls under them. So, these theorists couldn't be asking, in the usual way: Is this concept, which analytically commits itself to some claim p, a good concept to have?

Rather, they have to be asking the question: Could there be two versions of our basic normative concepts which, despite having the same narrow conceptual role, pick out distinct extensions? And, if so, wouldn't there have to be some fact of the matter about which of these concepts is correct and which one isn't, since they couldn't both be correct?

As I've argued, however, this is hard to make sense of. First, because it's hard to see how the thesis of Referential Normativity could be false (what further factor could be relevant to reference fixation?) Second, because even if we ditched Referential Normativity, we'd have a hard time seeing how to take the alternative concepts to be genuine *competitors* to ours (we can't make sense of the alternative judgments conflicting with ours). And third, because even if we did take them to be genuine competitors to ours, it's hard to see how we could fail to regard them as seriously *inferior* to ours, since, from our standpoint, they would have committed themselves to various mistakes. Finally, the thought that normative reality might have objective joints that our normative concepts might somehow miss also doesn't get much traction, since the relevant notion of objectivity cannot apply in the normative domain.

The perhaps unsurprising upshot is that there is a limit to the extent to which we can get underneath our most basic normative concepts and call them into question. I will leave the last word with Thomas Nagel (1997: 8–9):

> In order to have the authority it claims, reason must be a form or category of thought from which there is no appeal beyond itself—whose validity is unconditional because it is necessarily employed in every purported challenge to itself. This does not mean that there is no appeal against the results of any particular exercise of reason, since it is easy to make mistakes in reasoning . . . But the corrections or doubts must come from further applications of reason itself.[4]

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Notes

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Footnotes

1 It really should be: recognizably canonical uses of terms, since most normative terms can be used to make non-normative claims, for example, 'Given what the polls were saying, Hilary should have won.' This is a complication I propose to ignore.

2 For illustrative purposes, I have presented one particular type of view about what normative roles might look like. It bears emphasis that the arguments that follow are compatible with any number of alternative views about the nature of normative roles, including ones that incorporate such notions as universalizability (as on Kantian views) or interpersonal justification (as on contractualist views). (Thanks to Tom Nagel for this point.)

3 The issue here is reminiscent of Enoch (2011)'s objection to Scanlon's Carnapian version of normative realism. Enoch considers the possibility of people who treat as reasons for action what we would not consider to be reasons for action. In effect, he is considering a community that uses 'reason to do' with our normative role, but with a different extension. Without going into the details, the charge once again is that Scanlon's brand of realism is unable to rule against these 'counter-reasons' and in favor of our reasons. Scanlon's reply seems to me right (2014: 29):

> The problem seems to me illusory. These imagined conclusions about 'counter-reasons' conflict with our conclusions about reasons only insofar as they are interpreted as conclusions about reasons. So the question of which of us is correct is a normative question, which can be answered only through normative reasoning.

4 The earlier parts of this chapter are a reworking of Boghossian (2021). Thanks to Kit Fine, Yu Guo, Josh Schechter, Crispin Wright, Declan Smithies Sigrún Svavarsdóttir, Andrew Lee, and the participants in the workshop on Normative Realism held at NYU in May of 2023, for comments that helped improve this chapter.

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