

What Makes Normative Concepts Normative (Presidential Prize Award Winner)

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1. Introduction

When asked which of our concepts are *normative concepts*, metaethicists would be quick to list such concepts as GOOD, OUGHT, and REASON.¹ When asked *why* such concepts belong on the list, metaethicists would be much slower to respond. Eklund (2017) is a notable exception. He argues by elimination for “the Normative Role view” that normative concepts are normative in virtue of having a “normative role” or being “used normatively” (2017, p. 79). One view that Eklund aims to eliminate is “the Metaphysical view” that normative concepts are normative in virtue of referring to normative properties (2017, p. 71).² In addition to arguing that Eklund’s objection looks doubtful by its own lights, we argue that there are several plausible versions of the Metaphysical view that Eklund doesn’t eliminate, defending various claims about normative concepts and their relationships to deliberation, competence, reference, and possession along the way.

2. The Metaphysical View and Eklund’s Objection

The basic idea of the Metaphysical View is that normative concepts “inherit” their normativity from the normativity of the properties to which they refer. Though the Metaphysical View is attractive, it has not received an explicit defense. To be sure, there are plenty of metaethicists, such as, *inter alia*, Enoch (2011), who appear to commit themselves to the view over the course of defending comprehensive metaethical theories. More recently, McPherson (forthcoming, p. 14) argues that the Metaphysical View is one permutation of a broader “Properties First” approach to questions concerning the nature of normative concepts. But McPherson expresses sympathy for the broader approach, not the Metaphysical View in particular. Leary (2020) appears to endorse the Metaphysical View. But she does so in passing over the course of defending a metaphysical view of the nature of normative *properties*. We aim to build on this work by providing a sustained rebuttal to a specific objection from Eklund to the Metaphysical View, which he describes as his “strongest” one (2017, p. 75). This objection is based on a case, which is useful to reproduce in full, except each time Eklund uses linguistic terminology (e.g. ‘word’) it

can be read as something mentalistic (e.g. ‘concept’).³

“Suppose that an alien... 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 “thgir” normatively. Suppose, for example, that one of them, when learning English, has overheard English speakers speaking of what is “right,” having only an unspecific or mistaken idea of what the word might stand for—and introduced into her community’s own language a new expression, “thgir,” with the stipulation that “thgir” is to ascribe the property, whatever it is, that “right” ascribes, and then uses “thgir” in accordance with the stipulation. “Thgir” is then meaningful, but the meaning with which it is endowed does not guarantee that it plays the role in deliberation characteristic of normative concepts. **“Thgir” ascribes the same property as “right,” but it is hardly a normative predicate.**” (2017, p. 75 [original emphasis in italics; added emphasis in bold])

In this scenario, when English speakers use RIGHT, it refers to a normative property (say, *being right*). When the aliens use THGIR, it co-refers. The Metaphysical View predicts that both RIGHT and THGIR are normative because they each refer to a normative property (the same normative property in this case). According to Eklund, that’s implausible – RIGHT is normative but not THGIR. So, the Metaphysical View is false.

There are various avenues available for responding to Eklund’s objection. One avenue involves focusing on his claim that THGIR isn’t normative because the aliens don’t “in any way use [THGIR] normatively” (2017, p. 75). Of course, whether Eklund is right that the aliens don’t use THGIR normatively depends on the meaning of ‘normative.’⁴ Eklund doesn’t explain the meaning of ‘normative’ explicitly (2017, p. 64).⁵ However, he does offer clues as to how he thinks its meaning is best understood. One clue is his claim that THGIR isn’t used normatively because THGIR doesn’t play “the role in deliberation characteristic of normative concepts” (2017, p. 64). Another clue is his suggestion that part of what it is to use a concept normatively is to use it psychologically (2017, p. 79). Indeed, several passages suggest that he uses ‘normative’ in the same way that expressivists can be read as using it, i.e. using it to mean something *psychologically motivating* (2017, p. 66).

From this perspective, it might be helpful to consider how Eklund could characterize the more familiar concept RIGHT, which he presents as

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contrasting with THGIR. Eklund might say that RIGHT *disposes its users to have further thoughts about options thought of as right*. In other words, Eklund might say that concepts are normative because they're *deliberative* in the sense of *sustaining deliberation*. To illustrate, suppose two of us are deliberating about what to eat at a BBQ. We use RIGHT to think of eating a brand of vegan burger, the Impossible Burger, as right. We also use it to think of eating a rival brand of vegan burger, the Beyond Burger, as right. In doing so, we might be disposed to think further thoughts. For example, we might be disposed to think that Beyond Burgers have an odd aftertaste and that Impossible Burgers are God's gift to vegans. On this picture, it's by using RIGHT to think of these options as such that we're then disposed to think further things about them.

Now consider what Eklund might say about THGIR. First, Eklund might say that THGIR isn't normative because it *disposes its users not to think further thoughts about options thought of as thgir*. Alternatively, Eklund might say that THGIR isn't normative because using it fails to generate *any* disposition to think further thoughts. We'll consider this second suggestion shortly. If RIGHT is normative because it generates a disposition to think further thoughts about options thought of as right, then it's hard to see why it *wouldn't* be that THGIR is also normative in virtue of generating a disposition not to think further thoughts about options thought of as thgir. After all, being disposed not to think further thoughts about one's options sounds like the flipside of sustaining deliberation – it sounds like *settling deliberation* – which also has a normative ring to it. Thus, on this natural way of understanding what Eklund means by 'normative', Eklund is wrong to claim that the aliens aren't using THGIR normatively.

3. How to Be a Metaphysicist about Normative Concepts

In the previous section, we argued that it's hard to see why Eklund's claim that THGIR isn't normative is true. But while it's hard to see why it's true, we admit that it seems as much. Assuming that Eklund is right that THGIR isn't normative, the question for Metaphysicists then becomes whether they're committed to saying it's normative. In this section, we identify several ways in which Metaphysicists can avoid this commitment.

One concessive way in which Metaphysicists might do so is by taking Eklund's claims to heart and modifying their view. Instead of claiming that facts about referring to normative properties *fully* explain why normative concepts are normative, Metaphysicists might say that they're only *part* of the explanation – the other part involves facts about their *deliberative* use, such as how using them disposes users to think further thoughts about one's options or disposes users not to think further thoughts about one's

options. What fully makes normative concepts normative on this *wider* version of the Metaphysical View is that normative concepts refer to normative properties (i.e. they're used referentially) *and* play a deliberative role (i.e. they're used deliberatively).⁶ Wide Metaphysicalists can claim that because the aliens use THGIR only to refer to normative properties, THGIR isn't normative.

A less concessive reply can be found by emphasizing how Eklund's objection is supposed to work. Again, it purports to cast doubt on the idea that referring to normative properties fully explains why normative concepts are normative. The doubt is cast in a scenario where a concept – THGIR – is said to refer to normative properties but THGIR isn't normative because it isn't used deliberatively. As we saw above, Eklund doesn't develop nor argue for a theory of what it is to use a concept deliberatively. That's important, because it means Metaphysicalists need not accept any theory of deliberative use at odds with their own, including the theory of deliberative use as sustaining or settling deliberation suggested above. Instead, Metaphysicalists can claim that *what it is to use a concept deliberatively* is to *use it to refer to normative properties*. By embracing such a view, which is in the spirit of views of deliberation that can be found in Enoch (2011, p. 70), Metaphysicalists can reject Eklund's set up of the case. From this perspective, it makes no sense to claim that the aliens are using THGIR to refer to normative properties *and* that they're not using THGIR deliberatively. They're using THGIR to refer to normative properties iff they're using it deliberatively.

But one might wonder how much this helps Metaphysicalists. Perhaps there are cases where a concept is used normatively, i.e. "deliberatively" in the referential sense, where it's not plausible that such use fully explains why the concept is normative. Suppose, for example, that the aliens show up to the BBQ already satiated and that the aliens are philosophically minded. Instead of trying to decide on what to eat, they hive themselves off from the rest of the individuals at the BBQ, as philosophers are wont to do at social gatherings. Rather than using THGIR in thinking about what to eat, they philosophize about whether concepts like THGIR are normative. One might then think that the aliens aren't using THGIR normatively even though they're using it "deliberatively" in referential sense.

In response, Metaphysicalists might begin with the observation that it's unclear that the aliens in this modified scenario are even *using* THGIR in the first place. So, it's not clear that the aliens are using THGIR deliberatively. At best, the aliens in this version of the case are doing the mental analogue of *mentioning* THGIR. Because the aliens aren't using THGIR deliberatively, i.e. referring to normative properties, Metaphysicalists aren't committed

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to the implausible claim that THGIR is normative.

An opponent might construct another version of the alien BBQ scenario, where the aliens head straight to the grill to decide on what to eat. Suppose that the aliens use THGIR to think of eating an Impossible Burger as thgir, and hence satisfy whichever conditions Metaphysicalists maintain are necessary to refer to normative properties. But when the aliens use THGIR to refer to the normative property of being right, *no* disposition to think further thoughts about their options is generated. Perhaps the aliens' use of THGIR is not unlike our use of the paradigmatically non-normative concept TO THE LEFT OF in thinking about celery options at the hors d'oeuvres table as to the left of the carrots. Thinking of celery as to the left of the carrots has no dispositional upshot in us and likewise for the aliens when they use THGIR. But because the aliens use THGIR to refer to normative properties, Metaphysicalists have to say that THGIR is normative.

There are at least two replies available to Metaphysicalists, both of which share a common claim: that their opponent cannot just stipulate that the aliens satisfy the conditions for referring to normative properties with THGIR *and* stipulate that the aliens lack a disposition to think further thoughts about their options in using THGIR. One kind of Metaphysicalist might say that this can't be stipulated because it's part of their view that one necessary condition on referring to normative properties is being in the relevant *desire-like* state that disposes users to think further thoughts. For example, it could be that part of what it takes to refer to the normative property of being right is having (say) a desire to do the right thing. It could also be that such a desire would dispose one to think more about their options if they were to use some concept (e.g. RIGHT or THGIR) to refer to the normative property of being right instantiated by their options. On such a package of theses, desires or other noncognitive states more broadly would play a role reminiscent of the role that speaker intentions have been said to play in explaining how referring terms refer.⁷ Such a Metaphysicalist, who claims that there are *noncognitive constraints on reference*, could then say that it's not true that aliens refer to normative properties and hence it's not true that they're using THGIR deliberately and hence normatively.

Another Metaphysicalist who makes similar appeals to desires might begin by noting that to use a concept to refer to normative properties, it's necessary to *possess* the relevant concept. But then such a Metaphysicalist might claim that being in the relevant disposition-generating desire-like state is necessary for *possessing* normative concepts in the first place. On this view, if the aliens failed to use THGIR to refer to normative properties at the BBQ, that's because they failed to even possess the concept. While

a view on which there are *noncognitive constrains on normative concept possession* is in the minority in metaethics, it has a precedent in some debates in the philosophy of mind, such as debates about the nature of phenomenal consciousness (e.g. “the “experience thesis” in Balog, 2009, p. 299). One can think of the view in the same spirit as some views of the nature of phenomenal concepts. A common assumption about phenomenal concepts is that you have to have been in the relevant experiential state (e.g. a state of pain) to possess the corresponding phenomenal concept (e.g. pain). The view we’re floating makes the similar claim that possessing normative concepts requires having been in the relevant desire-like state. Wrongness, goodness, and other normative properties are like phenomenal properties, in that you have to have had the relevant experiences associated with them to possess the concepts necessary for referring to them.⁸

Putting the view picturesquely, the Metaphysical View is that normative concepts are normative in virtue of mirroring normative reality. Eklund aims to show that this is a mistake. We’ve argued that Metaphysicalists of various stripes escape Eklund’s “strongest” objection to their views.⁹

Notes

¹ Small caps denote concepts.

² Eklund characterizes the Metaphysical view as the view that normative concepts *ascribe* rather than *refer* to normative properties due to concerns about reference being too cheap (2017, p.8). Plausibly, however, there are normative concepts (e.g. REASONS) that they stand in some kind of relation to entities other than properties (e.g. objects), making it awkward to say that they ascribe rather than refer to such entities. In other words, no terminology here is perfect. We choose ‘refer’ out of familiarity and because we think that this choice isn’t especially substantive.

³ While Eklund discusses normative predicates in this passage, he’s explicit that his discussion carries over to concepts (2017, pp. 65-66). Moreover, he refers to the question at hand as “the concept question” (2017, p. 79) and titles the chapter in which he discusses this issue “Normative Concepts.” Following Eklund, we treat concepts and predicates similarly. But see Sawyer (2018) for an interesting discussion that problematizes this assumption.

⁴ For the most in depth discussion of the meaning of ‘normative’ of which we’re aware, see Finlay (2019).

⁵ “My answer to the concept question will be that an expression or concept is normative by virtue of being conventionally associated with a normative role. It is being conventionally associated with normative use—*whatever renders use normative*—that marks an expression or concept as normative” (2017, p. 64 [emphasis added]).

⁶ This view resembles “hybrid” theories of normative thought and concepts.

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See Laskowski (2015) for a defense of the former and Laskowski (2020) for a development and defense of the latter.

⁷ See, *inter alia*, Kaplan (1989). One might wonder why we've chosen a noncognitive state like a desire to serve as a constraint on reference rather than make the analogy with the philosophy of language even tighter by claiming that it's an *intention* that constrains reference. One reason is that it seems more plausible in the metaethical case to claim that ordinary users of normative concepts have (e.g.) desires to do what's right rather than (e.g.) intentions to refer to the property of being right. Another is that it seems more plausible to say that such desires would be associated with the relevant motivational dispositions.

⁸ Sinhababu (2017, Chapter 4) defends a similar picture.

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