**Commentary on Matti Eklund, *Choosing Normative Concepts* (Oxford, 2017)**
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A central question in the book is whether, in the end, there's anything that could even in principle satisfy the ardent realist's demands for an objective and non-deflationary normativity in the ethical domain. Perhaps what we think we want is not only metaphysically or epistemically extravagant or suspect, but actually *incoherent*, such that nothing could possibly fit the bill. And if not, then there's a challenge to say more clearly what it is we think we need in the way of real normative properties and facts, and how exactly this delivers what matters to us in the end. This is especially pressing in light of the contingencies there may be in the normative language and concepts people might employ—hence the book's title.

In particular, we need to address the worry that while there may indeed be ways it's right to live, for example, there may also be ways it's right* to live, ways it's right** to live, and so on, where these variant terms or concepts just ascribe different properties to actions, and do so in a way that bottoms out in ultimate parity, with nothing to decide between them—except, of course, trivially for each in its own terms. If that's how things are, then not even positing a robust, non-natural, objective property of rightness will give us what we were after as ardent realists. Nor will it help to go on to connect rightness to reasons, at least not if rightness* can similarly be connected to reasons*, with parity emerging again. It might then seem impossible even to state what we really wanted in the way of objective normativity, and what we think is missing from rival views, without just sounding mysterian or starting to bang the table.

I will focus on this central driving issue in the book and try to show why the ardent realist is not in fact impossible to satisfy: there is indeed a coherent position put forward by the ardent

realist, and we can say fairly straightforwardly what it take for that position to be true and for the ardent realist to be satisfied. What is primarily required is to avoid bad models for thinking about moral evaluation, evaluative properties, and the way reference works for moral terms. It's those defective models that get some realists into the sorts of trouble Matti identifies, and better models avoid these problems.

1.      The threat Matti identifies for ardent realist ambitions arises primarily for views that model evaluation or normative judgment too closely on other, familiar ascriptions of properties to things, thereby misconstruing normative concepts and properties from the start. A simple ethical naturalism, for example, might propose that in judging an act to be right we're ascribing a certain prosaic property to it, like being happiness maximizing, just as we might ascribe to a piece of metal the property of being magnetic, in making a scientific judgment about it. Similarly, a simple ethical non-naturalism might just add the twist that the property we're ascribing to the act is a non-natural one, like Gibbard's hypothetical 'exnat'—on the model, say, of ascribing an occult healing power to a crystal.

Now if that sort of property ascription were what's going on in evaluation or normative judgment, we would indeed run into problems. Different groups might use different concepts to ascribe different properties, and this could be true even if they all do so in the service of guiding action, such that the concepts and properties play similar practical roles for them. One group settles what to do using a concept that ascribes one property, another settles what to do using an alternative concept that ascribes another property, and so on, and we wind up with familiar Twin Earth problems or the related parity problem Matti raises: how is one concept or property privileged over the others, and indeed, what could that privileging even in principle amount to? Appealing to the objectivity or even the non-naturalness of the properties would be of no help here,

and neither would an appeal to the practical role played by such concepts and properties in settling what to do, since again there might be parity there too.

I believe that the key to avoiding this sort of problem is to reject from the start any such model of evaluation or normative judgment, and of how reference works in such contexts.[1] There is, of course, a sense in which on any realist view we must be 'ascribing a property' to something in judging it to be right or good—namely, the normative or evaluative property of rightness or goodness. But the relevant model here is very different from other models of property ascription. This is true even for mundane non-ethical evaluation, and it's worth looking at that briefly first. Consider the evaluation of an artifact. In evaluating a knife as a good one, 'ascribing goodness' to it, we're not simply ascribing to it a property like being sharp. Someone can attribute sharpness to a knife while not evaluating it at all: perhaps she mistakes the knife for a bookmark, or she's ignorant that a knife's function is to cut, or she fails to understand that sharpness makes things well-disposed toward cutting, and so doesn't see it as good-making here. We *evaluate* something when we judge that it's *good*, for example, and that's clearly something more than judging that it's sharp, say, or ascribing any other prosaic property of that sort to it.

A property like sharpness may be a good-making feature, as it is in a knife—or, for that matter, a bad-making feature, as it is in a bookmark; and so we can cite it in support of our evaluations. But the evaluation is more than just saying that something is sharp or not. This matters because the property we identify as the *evaluative property* should of course be *the property whose ascription constitutes evaluation*, which would be *goodness* here, not something like sharpness. And the knife's goodness will be the *resultant evaluative status* it has *by virtue of* having

resultance base properties (like sharpness) that count as good-*making* by making it *satisfy relevant standards of excellence* for knives. So we shouldn't conflate evaluative concepts and properties, like the concept or property of goodness, with non-evaluative concepts or properties, like the concept or property of sharpness, which may be a good-making property but is not the property of goodness itself here. Even when we cite prosaic good-making properties in the process of evaluation, the *evaluation* is not just the *ascribing of those properties as such*, but the citing of them, at least implicitly, *as good-making*. So in evaluation of this sort we're making at least implicit reference to *evaluative standards*, ascribing to the thing a *resultant evaluative status* due to the relation between the base properties and the standards. In fact, this structure is precisely what fixes a common subject of evaluative discourse in the first place, when we set about evaluating something; and it's what makes it possible for people to have genuine evaluative disagreements even where they agree on the prosaic base properties: they may just have different views of the appropriate *standards*, and so of how the base properties make the thing stack up.

Now these structural points apply equally to the ethical domain. Saying that an experience is pleasant or that an act is happiness maximizing is no more in itself to evaluate the experience as good or the act as right than saying that something is sharp is to evaluate it as good. The evaluative or normative property ascribed in evaluative or normative judgment in ethics, such as goodness or rightness, is again a more complex, resultant property, implicating claims about relevant evaluative *standards* and *relations* to base properties as part of this practice of evaluation. This, I would say, is why the concept of goodness or rightness is an evaluative one but the concepts of sharpness or of being pleasant or  happiness maximizing are not; and similarly with the complex *properties* of goodness or rightness, ascribed by such concepts in evaluative judgment. It is this sort of practical

*role* involved in evaluation that makes for evaluative or normative concepts and properties. And here I think Matti and I are broadly in agreement in our appeal to certain practical roles.

2.        Returning, then, to the earlier worry, the first point is that our thin evaluative or normative concepts of goodness and rightness need to be understood on this model, where they play a *formal* role within evaluative practice, as labels for the kind of *resultant evaluative status* I've described that can obtain *by virtue of* certain facts about relevant standards, base properties and relations. The earlier conceptual contingency worry arose because we imagined one group using 'rightness' to ascribe to acts the property of being happiness maximizing, while another uses 'rightness*' to ascribe some deontological property to them, and so on, each using such ascriptions in practice to *settle what to do*. But that's not at all what's going on in ethical evaluation. We don't use 'rightness' to refer to a property like being happiness maximizing, even if we may think that being happiness maximizing is the single right-*making* property; nor are we just settling what to do by ascribing such a property as such—as if ethical deliberation were just a matter of having a disposition to do whatever is happiness maximizing, then seeking to discover which acts have that property, and then doing them. That picture *misses evaluation entirely*. In ethical evaluation, we instead use 'rightness' again to stand for a formal, resultant evaluative status acts can have by virtue of various facts about relevant standards, base properties, and relations between them. Similarly with 'goodness' and its applications. And the relevant deliberative practice, determining the practical role for these concepts and making them evaluative or normative, is much richer than just using some prosaic property *directly* to settle what to do.

We are, of course, trying to settle what to do. But as creatures who are capable of informing our deliberation with the broadest forms of normative reflection, we do this by asking the broadest normative questions using thin normative concepts like good and right. We're seeking

to arrive at informed judgments about what's worthy of pursuit, promotion, and respect as we make choices and act. These are questions broadly about value and reasons: goods to be sought, good ends to be pursued, and values to be respected in our interactions with the world, whether by promoting certain things or by constraining our actions in appropriate ways. In thinking about these things we develop our conception of the *appropriate standards* for what it is to *act well all things considered*; and we apply those standards in arriving at particular evaluative or normative judgments.

Importantly, this talk of what is 'worthy of pursuit', or 'good', or 'appropriate' or 'acting well' is all operating at a formal level: these terms are not being used to ascribe particular, prosaic properties like being happiness maximizing or satisfying desires, and there are no intelligible alternative notions of 'value*' or 'shmalue', or 'good*' or 'appropriate*' here. We shouldn't rush to think we have the foggiest idea what such things would even mean here. There is just a *single set of formal, thin, evaluate and normative concepts associated with the general deliberative project,* which is again precisely why we can all be addressing a common subject matter even where we disagree ethically, rather than just talking past each other.

The common project for us as deliberating rational agents, at least on an ardent realist picture, is to try to figure out which ways of living are genuinely fitting to the way the world normatively is, responding appropriately to its inherent normative profile—the kinds of values it contains and confronts us with, such as the dignity of persons or the badness of suffering. There are no 'shmalues' or 'shmreasons': there are just whatever values there are and the reasons associated with them, calling for certain responses. We are trying, then, in substantive ethical reflection, to work out the appropriate standards for action and character. And if we disagree about

this then we'll disagree about what is good or right, where this is a matter of having different ideas about the proper specification of this common formal target, goodness or rightness.

Different groups are not simply talking past one another, ascribing different prosaic properties with different thin concepts like rightness, rightness*, and so on, as imagined earlier. Again, I deny that there are any such different concepts at this basic, thin level. There's just rightness, which is a resultant evaluative status acts can have by virtue of having features that make them satisfy the evaluative standards relevant to rational deliberation, thereby making them choiceworthy. The difference between the utilitarian and deontologist groups is not a matter of alternative thin normative terms being used to ascribe different prosaic properties to acts, like being happiness maximizing in one case or some deontological property in the other. It's a matter of substantive disagreement over the appropriate standards for human action—a dispute about which ones provide the proper material specification of a shared, formal notion of rightness.

So to return to our original question: *what, ultimately, does the ardent realist want here*? My answer is simple: we want there to be a fact of the matter as to who is correct about this. There is no question of multiple, alternative thin normative concepts and no worry about which one is somehow privileged over the others, as there would be on the sort of model of normative property ascription I've rejected. There's one set of thin normative questions we all face, and the ardent realist's claim is that there are correct answers to these questions insofar as *there are ways of living that are objectively favored by the way the world is in its normative aspects*, which determines relevant facts about *standards* or about which prosaic features are truly good- or right-making. If deontology is correct, for example, this is because given the values we confront in the world, which, let's suppose, include the dignity of persons, the appropriate standards governing human action, which best respect and reflect those values as a whole, will be deontological ones rather

than utilitarian ones. Of course, all of this may raise metaphysical and epistemic worries. But it is in any case an intelligible posit. And if it were realized, it would constitute the *singular, privileged answer* we were after, avoiding the original worry.

What's doing the crucial work here, in avoiding the potential threat Matti identified, are two things: (i) understanding thin normative concepts as working on the model I've proposed, getting their reference from the kind of evaluative practice I've described, within which they play their distinctive evaluative or normative roles, and (ii) the objective evaluative or normative properties and facts I'm positing to ground objective standards related to that practice and form of judgment. I see this as being a version of Matti's 'alternative unfriendly' approach to solving the initial problem, appealing to the normative role played by thin concepts in determining their reference. On my view, though, it's crucial that the normative role is not just any practical role involving settling what to do, but specifically the role I've described in this model of evaluation; and any talk of 'reference' here must be understood on some such model. It's also crucial, if my view is to be an ardent realist one, that the rich form of deliberation I've described is not just optional. I want to say that as rational deliberators it belongs to us to employ these thin normative concepts and to seek to grasp the relevant standards for human action that are adequate to the evaluative dimension of the world. That's how we ought to be settling what to do.

That is, I take it, an irreducibly normative claim about the proper role for these concepts, rather than a merely *de facto* claim about the role we give them. And similarly with my claim that there are features of the world that *objectively merit* certain responses from us—features like the badness of suffering or the reality of human dignity, which ground normatively authoritative standards for us: this is likewise a basic, irreducibly normative claim. Or at least I take it to be so: if our account dispenses with basic normative claims like that, bottoming out instead in non-

normative facts about our desires or emotions, say, I don't think we can get what the ardent realist wants; we'd have to be rather less ardent. This is where the non-naturalism enters the picture for me: if irreducibly normative properties and facts cannot be accommodated within a naturalist metaphysics, then I'm committed to something non-natural by positing them. But it's not as if the non-naturalism is being trotted out to do some kind of weird, magical work in abstraction from ordinary thoughts about normativity. The non-naturalism is nothing but an *implication* of the irreducible normativity we need to posit to preserve ardent realism.

3.      Two last points. First, I haven't said anything so far about thick normative concepts and properties, about which Matti has a lot of interesting things to say. But my view is that the existence of alternative thick normative concepts needn't pose any threat to ardent realism. All we need is for some of them to pick out real properties that figure into the correct standards of goodness or rightness, while others do not. We might say, for example, that the concept of justice figures into a correct specification of standards for human action, reflecting genuine worldly values such as human dignity and facts about human interests, such that it bears on rightness of action. By contrast, the concept of honor, in the sense used in talk of honor killings of girls or women by relatives who claim they have brought dishonor to the family, does not. If it's built into the concept of honor that 'dishonorable' behavior justifies violence against women, then there is simply no such property. If instead the idea of dishonor is defined only with descriptive criteria, leaving out implicit claims about what it would justify, then even if there is such a property it fails to reflect any normative reality that would make it figure into the true standards for human action in the way those who use the concept think it does. As long as we can make such claims about various thick concepts, in connection with their place or lack of place in an articulation of the standards that best reflect normative reality, the ardent realist will be satisfied.

4.      One final point about a matter where Matti thinks we disagree, but I'm not sure we do. I've agreed with Matti that in both non-ethical and ethical contexts what makes concepts such as goodness or rightness, and the properties they ascribe, *evaluative* or *normative* is something about the practical *roles* they play. And in the ethical domain I've described these roles in terms of a rich, normatively specified deliberative practice associated with *rational agency*. But Matti takes issue with one thing in particular I've said elsewhere about normative concepts and properties.

The claim I made was that an irreducibly normative property like goodness or rightness is such that there can be no non-normative concept for it: any concept adequate to such a property will be normative. This was by way of contrast with views, like Gibbard's, that posit only prosaic properties in the world but allow that we can have both normative and non-normative concepts for some of them. I was saying some properties themselves are instead special, such that only normative concepts are adequate to them. I stand by that. But I don't thereby mean to deny that we could *refer* to these properties using *non*-normative expressions or concepts. We can presumably refer to goodness using the non-normative expression or concept 'G.E. Moore's favorite property'. And nothing stops me from making a claim like "The pleasure I took in reading Matti's book was brimming with Moore's favorite property," which in the right context could even function derivatively as an evaluative claim. So I don't mean to deny that non-normative expressions or concepts can be used to ascribe properties that are normative properties. My claim is just that in such cases the non-normative concept fails to be *the concept for* or *of* the normative property in question: the concept *Moore's favorite property*, even if it can be used to ascribe the property of goodness, is not thereby the concept *of* the property of goodness; it is not fully adequate to that property. Pointing to a property is not the same thing as adequately capturing it, which requires more of the concept in question. A concept that is genuinely adequate to an evaluative or

normative property, which is what I was talking about, is one that not only ascribes the property but ascribes it *in a way that non-derivatively constitutes evaluation or normative judgment*. The concept of *goodness* passes that test; the concept of *Moore's favorite property* does not.

This brings us to Matti's example of alien observers who invent a word 'thgir' ('right' spelled backwards) just to ascribe whatever property our term 'right' ascribes, without using it normatively at all themselves. It's a non-normative predicate, but they apparently use it to ascribe rightness, a normative property. Now again, I don't deny such a possibility. What I do deny is that thgir is an *adequate concept of* that property just because it can be used to refer to it—any more than *Moore's favorite property* is an adequate concept of the property of goodness just because we can use it to refer to goodness. If the aliens have no sense of the evaluative practical role played by our 'right' and rightness—no idea that it works on the kind of evaluative model I've described rather than simply referring directly to some prosaic property like being happiness maximizing— then they're certainly not capturing the property of rightness with thgir, even if they can somehow use that term successfully to pick out its extension. We should not translate 'thgir' as 'right', for example, and we should deny that they really have the concept of the property of rightness. If Matti grants that, then I think we have no real disagreement on this issue.