New Essays on Normative Realism

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The Editors' introduction to *New Essays on Normative Realism* somewhat unambitiously characterizes the work when say that it "collects newly commissioned essays on various facets of 'normative realism'." (p. 1). It would be safe to say that the volume does this and much more, as there are several core, important issues relating to the topic of normative realism that are addressed throughout the volume. "Realism" about morality, and normativity more generally, has been at the center of many debates in meta-ethics and other sub-fields of philosophy for several decades now. There are now a number of iterations of objections by opponents of realism, followed by defenses and refinements by proponents. This volume contains some of the latest developments in the cycle of criticism and refinement. The list of contributors is impressive, as it features many established figures in metaphysics, the philosophy of language, epistemology, ethics, and meta-ethics. The volume is also notable for its mix of junior scholars, and in particular for the original work on topics surrounding normative realism in the contributions from these authors.

In the interest of highlighting some of the areas where this volume makes a significant contribution to core issues relating to normative realism, I won't focus on providing commentary on each individual essay. I reiterate that many of the contributions are excellent, and the volume will provide a valuable resource to philosophers looking for the latest contributions to the literature on normative realism. Instead I will provide some partial highlights of what I take to important themes in the volume, with some brief commentary. This leaves much of the volume unexplored here, but I expect that others will give the papers I don't comment on here the attention they deserve.

1. Alternative concepts and their significance for realism

A challenge to realism that has already generated substantial recent attention is challenge from "alternative normative concepts". Matti Eklund's *Choosing Normative Concepts* (2017) provides

the original extensive discussion of the challenge, but the topic remains a live one and is discussed at length in both Eklund's contribution (Ch. 6, "Alternative Concepts, Ardor, and Elusive Questions") and Boghossian's (Ch. 8, "Minimalism, Alternative Normative Concepts, and Realism"); it also receives a related application to logical monism in Clarke-Doane's chapter (Ch. 9, "What Is Logical Monism?").

At the heart of the challenge is the idea that realism about the normative is committed to the idea that there are normative properties that are somehow *privileged*. This is an intuitive idea, as if obligation is genuinely real, then our concept OUGHT should pick out a property of obligation that is in some way worth talking about. It is, in Eklund's phrase, "favored from the point of view of reality". (p. 118)

Eklund thinks that explicating the notion of privilege is a serious challenge for the realist, though he is careful to emphasize that it is one that can be addressed in a number of ways. The central notion in the challenge is that of an "alternative normative concept": in essentials, a concept that is *normative* in that it shares the same normative role as our concept OUGHT, and is also an *alternative* concept in that it refers to some property other than obligation. The standard nomenclature for the alternative concept is 'OUGHT*', though of course if the possibility of an alternative normative concept exists, there will be many normative concepts that are alternative in this sense.

The challenge presented by these alternative concepts is formulated in various ways. Eklund says:

> I can tell myself that surely I ought to do what I ought to do. But it may equally be true that I ought* to do what I ought* to do, which is what 'ought*'-users might tell themselves. What we want, one might be tempted to say, is a reason to go by what we ought to do rather that what we ought* to do. But the problem is that even if we can tell ourselves that there are such *reasons*, there can be *reasons** to go by what one ought* to do. And so on and so forth. (p.114)

Eklund also encourages us to imagine a separate linguistic community who uses the concept OUGHT*. While they use their concept in practical reasoning which leads to actions, some of which we view as wrong or even abhorrent, Eklund says "they can react in a corresponding way to us". (p. 114) Here we get to the "further question", which realists (Eklund says) must either answer, explaining why OUGHT really is a better concept than OUGHT*, or otherwise find themselves stuck in an uncomfortable position where they hold that while OUGHT is better, they can't say why.

We see similar considerations raised in Clarke-Doane's "What is Logical Monism?" (Ch. 9), which is about the logical monist claim that there is "one true logic". Clarke-Doane at one point emphasizes that it would be coherent to hold that 'ought' refers to the property *obligation*, and we are obliged to infer classical validities (or, in the moral case, maximize happiness) but

nonetheless decide not to infer all and only classical validities (or perform some non-happiness-maximizing acts). (p. 183) The thought is that there are some "alternative" referents for 'ought', and it is coherent to decide to act in ways that correspond to the alternatives, even if the alternatives are not the referent for 'ought' in English.

Pluralists can, if Eklund is right, describe alternative concepts that are coherent. (Though Boghossian (Ch. 8) challenges this on pp. 172-3.) In what way do the coherent alternatives constitute a challenge to the realist? Admittedly it can be tempting to think that realists have to be able to show, in terms that would be compelling to the possessor of the alternative concept, why the alternative is mistaken. Whether this is true on reflection deserves more attention. One earlier iteration of a challenge to realism, found in the "Moral Twin Earth" argument form Horgan and Timmons (1992) alleged that realists could not explain how possible communities with different patterns of usage of 'ought' *disagree* with one another. Horgan and Timmons famously use examples of communities that mimic ethicists who actually disagree with one another (namely deontologists and consequentialists) so the force of the Moral Twin Earth thought experiment is limited as it does not obviously show that realists need to explain possible disagreement across a wide range of communities (cf. Dunaway (2020)). But one thing that can be said in its favor is that it is quite intuitive that realists should be able to explain the possible instances of normative disagreement that Horgan and Timmons describe. Disagreement is a familiar phenomenon, and a view which failed to explain it would have a significant mark against it. Recent challenges from alternative concepts, while in many ways improvements on the older Moral Twin Earth challenge, are in a worse position here. The demand to explain intuitive disagreement is reasonable; the "mistake" of a hypothetical user of an alternative concept is less pressing.

What is wrong with not being able to say why, in terms that are compelling to both parties, that the party with the alternative concept is mistaken? The demand is not cashed out in familiar terms: it is trivially true that the users of the alternative concept are mistaken; the worry is supposed to stem from the fact that there is an alternative concept according to which they are not mistaken*, and we are mistaken*. And so it is much more plausible that realists can simply reject the demand without cost; in general, it is not necessary that one be able to show that every coherent alternative position should be discarded in a way which would be satisfactory to everyone (including someone committed to the coherent alternative). Boghossian argues in this volume that the demand behind the alternative concepts challenge can be rejected: "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?". (p. 175)

2. Grounding and explanation

One recent positive development in realist theorizing about the normative is a broad interest in metaphysical explanation. *New Essays on Normative Realism* represents this trend quite well.

Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (Ch. 10) deploy the notion of *grounding* to explicate the authority of moral reasons. For Bengson et al., reasons are facts that favor an action; moral reasons are present when the fact together with the existence of a moral requirement fully ground the favoring-relation between the fact and act. (p. 209) Here the notion of a full ground is the same explanatory notion that is familiar in metaphysics.

Rosen (Ch. 17) is concerned with the details of the explanatory relation between moral principles and moral facts. He argues that the natural facts about a particular action ground the moral status of that action, and that this grounding relation holds because there is a general moral principle according to which the relevant natural features stand in the making-relation to the moral feature. (pp. 421-422) A rough illustration: if I promise to meet you for lunch, and it is wrong for me to miss the lunch, my particular promise grounds the wrongness of not showing up, and this is because not keeping a promise stands in the making-relation to wrongness. The making-relation here is an explanatory notion that is not identical to grounding, and Rosen explores several options for how to understand their relationship.

These are competing proposals on the nature of moral explanations, and the debate over the nature of moral explanation will continue. Here I do not want to weigh in on the details of the debate, but will only note the following. Regardless of the details, anyone who holds that moral requirements enter into these grounding explanations (or, in the case of Rosen, the more general making-relation) appears to be firmly in the realist camp. These are views on which moral properties play an explanatory role, and having an explanatory profile of this kind would appear to be unique to the real.

The explanatory role of the normative is a subject of other contributions to *New Essays on Normative Realism*, and two contributions in particular raise new lines of questioning for the explanatory priority claimed by realists. Kirwin (Ch. 11) characterizes the anti-realist as someone who holds that "value ultimately has its source […] in the agent's own particular motivational or evaluative attitudes, in her values, desires, normative judgments, commitments, plans, or intentions" (p. 225) and goes on to criticize the motivation of what she calls the "moralist anti-realist". The moralist anti-realist endorses anti-realism on the grounds that only the anti-realist grounding can explain why value is "normative for us". Kirwin argues against this motivation, on the grounds that anti-realist explanations "alienate" us from our evaluative attitudes by forcing us to take a third-person perspective on them. From this alienated perspective, these attitudes are not normative for us in the way the target anti-realist requires. And so a realist who rejects the anti-realist grounding claim will not fare any worse than the anti-realist in explaining how we experience normativity.

Ginsborg (Ch. 13) argues that there are "primitive" norms. The respect in which these norms are primitive is cashed out primarily in terms of how the norms are grasped: Ginsborg highlights children who, from an early age sort objects on the ground that certain objects "go together". But Ginsborg argues these norms are not only among those grasped early on; they are also primitive

in the metaphysical sense, as non-cognitive treatments of the phenomenon are lacking. If successful this argument would show that some norms are a part of reality, although the content of the relevant norms would be somewhat significant departure from the typical realist picture.

This volume features a number of critics of realism who dismiss the relevance of metaphysical joint-carving, often explicated in terms of a Lewisian notion of "naturalness" or "eliteness", to the realist picture on which certain normative properties occupy a privileged part of reality. It is natural to hold that the properties that feature in, for example, explanations at the level of quantum mechanics, are elite and therefore an important part of reality. And so holding that normative properties are similarly a part of reality because they are elite in the same sense seems to be a natural articulation of the realist view of normativity. Often the criticism of this idea is couched in terms of the openness of the question about whether to pattern one's actions, or care about, elite properties. One could choose to be concerned with the elite* properties instead (Eklund p. 135; Clarke-Doane p. 192). Dasgupta p. 159 concludes on the basis of worries along these lines that ELITENESS is a normative concept—it has *normative significance* built into it.

Conclusions along these lines would be warranted if eliteness were simply defined as an additional, higher-order property whose only role is to explain what distinguishes OUGHT from OUGHT* and makes the former rather than the latter the correct concept for normative theorizing. But this view of eliteness is not the only option available to the realist. Anyone building on Lewis's original use of the notion will reject it; Lewis identified the "perfectly natural" properties as those that have a role in the explanations of a fully developed physics. It is well-known that Lewis's exact notion of naturalness is in several ways not suitable to help the normative realist. But the idea can be generalized to include the notions that feature in explanations—not just physical explanations, as Lewis held. This opens the door to the possibility that there are elite normative features. Elite properties are worth caring about, but eliteness (and their significance for what to care about) is intimately tied to their explanatory role.

It is worth noting that the contributions discussed at the beginning of this section already take on many of the commitments that would be involved in holding that the normative is elite. Views on which moral properties are involved in full grounding explanations (Bengson et. al.) or in covering law making-explanations for grounding facts (Rosen) appear to be exactly the type of view on which the explanatory profile of an elite (in a suitably generalized sense) property is present. To some extent the same could be said for views on which a norm is primitive, or not grounded in our attitudes, although here an attribution of eliteness in the relevant sense would need some further rationale, beyond mere primitiveness.

A full account of eliteness will spell out the relationship between what it is to be elite and what it is to feature in (certain kinds of) explanations. The point I wish to emphasize here is that eliteness will not simply be defined as the higher-order property that makes something worth caring about; we care about eliteness because we care about the properties that feature in the

relevant kinds of explanations (along with the other eliteness-making features, whatever they turn out to be).

Of course, it is possible to deny that there is anything significant about having this kind of explanatory profile, while remaining internally coherent. But these realists who are focused on the explanatory profile of the normative do not attempt to show that someone who coherently cares about a different, but structurally similar, relation of explanation* is making a mistake, in terms that would be compelling to the explanation* enthusiast. And this seems to be the right attitude. As I emphasized above, not every mistake can be shown to be incoherent from the perspective of the person who is making the mistake. Metaphysical explanation seems clearly to be worth caring about even in the absence of such a demonstration; the same courtesy could naturally be extended to the claims about eliteness made by realists.

3. Normative notions and non-cognitivism

For a volume on normative realism, it is perhaps to be expected that there is scant attention to its anti-realist competitors. We do get an extended treatment of one kind of competitor from Street (Ch. 5), who develops a relativist view. Street's relativism is clearly a version of anti-realism, although as she notes (p. 89) some may not be satisfied that it meets their preferred criteria for relativism. In explicating her view, Street makes use of a helpful distinction: relativism could either be explicated as a view about the structure of our normative concepts, or as a view about the facts/properties that satisfy our normative concepts. While some relativists opt for the former, holding that it is part of the concept REASON that what is a reason only holds relative to a set of normative attitudes, Street opts for a view on which the concept is neutral on whether reasons are relative to a set of values, but the properties we use REASON to pick out are relational properties which hold in part between an action and the relevant subject's normative attitudes. (pp. 99-100)

In several places throughout this volume the question of whether a particular domain (or judgments about a particular domain) is normative is raised. Wright (Ch. 19) asks whether mathematics is normative based on some considerations from Wittgenstein. Dasgupta (Ch. 7) argues that "conceptual" objectivity—that is, facts about which concepts to use that are not settled by our preferences or tastes—is a "normative notion". (p. 156) Here we can note that there appears, *prima facie*, to be a distinction similar to what Street exploits in Ch. 5 that is worth articulating: as Street points out there can be concepts that have relativity built into them, but also concepts that are neutral on relativity but pick our properties that are relational. Likewise, there might be concepts that somehow have normativity built into them, and concepts which are neutral on normativity but pick out normative facts.

The authors appear to have a preference for the first understanding: Dasgupta says that the metaphysics of his proposal are exactly the metaphysics of the Lewis-Sider account of natural properties, and the concept NATURALNESS, which picks out Lewisian naturalness, is stipulated to

be “normatively significant”. (p. 158) Wright says that there are normative principles governing what we ought to think about arithmetical matters: when we count the fingers on a normal pair of human hands and do not arrive at 10, we conclude that we have not counted correctly, and do not entertain the possibility that $5 + 5 \neq 10$. Moreover, we treat the relevant arithmetical facts as true in any counterfactual scenario. These norms on what to think about arithmetic, he says, are part of our “attitude” toward arithmetic (p. 459) and goes on to consider whether realist or non-cognitivist strategies do better at vindicating this attitude.

As I mentioned above, anti-realism, especially in its non-cognitivist forms, is not a primary focus of this volume. However, there are two ways in which it is relevant to the issues for realism that the volume raises. The first is the distinction between concepts that are normative because normativity is part of their content, and concepts that pick out properties that have normative entailments. For a realist, the distinction will make sense. Moreover, many realists will be happy to allow that some concepts have normative entailments, though some may reject the entailments without making any conceptual mistake. The connection between Lewisian eliteness/naturalness and explanation I mentioned earlier illustrates this idea: it is plausible that we ought to theorize in terms of the properties that are genuinely explanatory, and our concept ELITE applies only to properties with the relevant explanatory profile. There is no requirement to add to this picture that the concept ELITE has normativity built into it; we can allow that some possessors of the concept fail to recognize the normative implications of the fact that such-and-such property is elite.

The same possibility does not exist if we adopt a non-cognitivist rather than realist view of normativity. Here is one example: for Gibbard (2011), normative concepts are planning concepts, as their meaning is given by the planning-states they express. A normative claim *N* is only entailed by another claim *C* if one is committed to being in the planning-state expressed by *N* by being in the state expressed by *C.* So, if *C* entails *N*, on the Gibbardian picture *C* must itself be a normative claim because any claim that did not express a planning-state could not commit one to being in the planning state expressed by *N*. Gibbard (2011) puts this reasoning to use in giving an expressivist explanation of the concept MEANING, with the normative entailments of meaning-claims taking center stage.

This is just one example of a non-cognitivist view of normative concepts; what it illustrates is that it is very natural, and perhaps mandatory for a non-cognitivist to hold that, when there is normativity in a domain, normativity must be a “part” of the relevant concept. This gives us no reason to think realists must deploy the same explanatory strategy. The realist will recognize the possibility of normative entailments which are not recognized by everyone who possesses the relevant concepts. Realists, who are not committed to the non-cognitivist mode of explanation, can hold that meaning, eliteness, addition, and the like, have normative implications without holding that the concepts MEANING, ELITE, and ADDITION have normative components.

There is a second reason why, even for a volume on normative realism, attention to non-cognitivism is relevant to the investigation. Several entries highlight challenges for realism about various domains. To take an example, let us suppose that as Wright (Ch. 19) argues, realism cannot explain, or provide evidence for, the claim that our arithmetical practices are tracking and independent arithmetical reality. (p. 479) And let us suppose, moreover, that it is a reasonable demand that any full account the nature of mathematics should provide such an explanation. What follows? The section in which Wright summarizes the above conclusion is titled "Cognitivism or Non-Cognitivism?". And he mentions briefly that he views the problems raised for cognitivism as an argument for "Deflationism": "Deflationism's best argument is the want of *any* kind of convincing model even in outline, of how a recognition of absolute counterfactual robustness may be accomplished". (p. 478)

It is appropriate to be pedantic about a methodological point here: the absence of a realist explanation of a phenomenon (in this case, the counterfactual robustness of arithmetical facts) is not, on its own, a good argument for a competitor to realism. The force of the argument also depends on whether there is a viable alternative that provides an explanation that the realist fails to provide. Certainly it would be better for realism if the requisite explanation were available. But the argument would hardly qualify as the "best argument" for a non-realist view, as Wright says, in the absence of a demonstration that non-realism is a viable alternative. In the absence of any alternative all we have is an interesting or surprising feature of realism.

Here some relatively old literature on non-cognitivism may be instructive. Past iterations of the debate between realism and its competitors, especially expressivist versions of non-cognitivism, emphasized the above methodological point. Timothy Willamson's "Must Do Better" in Williamson (2007), and Mark Schroeder's *Being For* (2008) stressed the importance of rigorous development of anti-realism generally (in Willamson's case) and expressivism in particular (Schroeder). In the case of Schroeder (2008), the argument goes on to actually develop an expressivist semantics, and concludes that the development faces substantial obstacles. If this is right, then any failure on the part of the realist to provide the called-for explanation may not be terribly worrisome. Without issuing any final verdicts on these earlier debates between realists and anti-realists, we can note here that development of the anti-realist view is crucial for the assessment of realism.

Street's entry in Ch. 5 is one instance of a development of anti-realism in this volume, but relativism/constructivism is just one form that anti-realism can take. Moreover, the constructivist view developed there does not seem to be the kind of anti-realism that other critics of realism in the rest of this volume have in mind. In fact one popular avenue of criticism of realism from this volume might apply in similar ways to Street's relativism. Surely there could be a REASON* concept that picks out something that does not hold relative to an agent's values, or picks out something that holds relative to something slightly different than an agent's values. The question of why we should care about reasons rather than what the REASON* concept picks out arises, and

the attendant symmetry between users of Reason and Reason* will, if problematic for realism, be problematic for relativism as well.

Wright is sensitive to the worry that there is no developed anti-realist alternative (p. 480) but leaves only a quotation from the notoriously anti-systematic later Wittgenstein, which does little toward the needed development of an alternative. Clarke-Doane tells us that "some kind of non-cognitivist treatment is called for" (p. 194) as analogues of the difficulties he alleges for logical monism apply to normative realism. Dasgupta, after arguing that objectivity is "irreducibly normative", goes on to consider what his conclusion means for those who, like himself, deny the existence of primitive normativity. His conclusion is that if there is no primitive normativity, "there aren't really "two" [the world and us] there in the first place: it's better described as an arbitrary line through *it*, the *we-and-world* unity". (p. 161) All of these are evocative ways of indicating a sense in which the relevant notions are not a part of the fabric of reality. But this is as far as the discussion of anti-realism goes; it is worth wondering whether the attraction of anti-realism here is simply that it does not receive the same amount of critical scrutiny that the realist side receives.

It would be unreasonable to point a finger at any individual contribution for failing to provide a development of a non-cognitivist alternative. Each develops a line of argument against some form of realism that deserves attention. Perhaps, as I have suggested above, some of the challenges can be answered directly. But even if they can't, the force of these challenges can be assessed only if we have an idea of the strength of the anti-realist's competing view. As this volume contains many worthwhile examples of new directions for investigation of normative realism, there are old lessons from previous iterations of the debate over realism that are relevant and worth remembering.

I have written about some common themes that are raised by the entries in *New Essays on Normative Realism*. I have not commented on each entry. Other contributions cannot be fit into a convenient theme for discussion in a short review, but many will be of interest to researchers interested in specific topics connected to normative realism. These include Peacocke's "Rationalist" treatment of realism (Ch. 2); issues in moral epistemology by Smithies and McGrath (Chs. 3 and 4); Broome on reason (count noun) vs. reasons (Ch. 12); Tomasello and Gonzolez-Cabrera on psychological research on the development of the capacity to form normative beliefs (Ch. 14), Matherne on Kant on aesthetic normativity (Ch. 15); moral status and moral grounds by Johnson (Ch. 16), and Antonia Peacocke on grounding in aesthetic normativity (Ch. 18). The variety of topics and the quality of the contributors in this volume indicate that interest in normative realism is not a philosophical fad. Both the challenges to realism, as well as the developments of realism, are new and innovative. But they are also recognizably developments of arguments about the same topic that animated what began as debates about "moral realism" dating back to the 1980s. *New Essays in Normative Realism* is a proof by example that these debates are still alive, and will fruitfully continue for some time.

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