

## Expressivism and Alternative Normative Concepts

Matti EKLUND\* 

**ABSTRACT.** In recent work – primarily the book *Choosing Normative Concepts* (2017) – I have presented what I see as a new, significant problem regarding normativity. Briefly, it has to do with the existence of alternative normative concepts. What if I know that I ought to  $\phi$ , but at the same time I know that I ought\* to  $\psi$ , where  $\psi$  is an incompatible course of action and the concept OUGHT\* is an alternative OUGHT-like concept? I think that this kind of question raises many different issues. But one thing it does is to present problems for what I call ardent realism, a view which I believe often underlies what realists about normativity say and hold. Several theorists have suggested that expressivism somehow provides a way out of the problem I present, and my main aim here is to evaluate this suggestion.<sup>1</sup> My conclusions are negative. Expressivism does not provide a way out. Or, more carefully: it does not provide a way out not already afforded by other views, and that has not already been discussed in the context of discussing such other views.

**Keywords:** Ardent realism, normativity, alternative concepts, expressivism, truth

### 1. Introduction

In recent work – primarily the book *Choosing Normative Concepts* (2017) – I have presented what I see as a new, significant problem regarding normativity. I will describe the problem in detail in sections 2 and 3, but briefly, it has to do with the existence of alternative normative concepts. What if I know that I ought to  $\phi$ , but at the same time I know that I ought\* to  $\psi$ , where  $\psi$  is an incompatible course of action and the concept ought\* is an alternative ought-like concept? I think that this kind of question raises many different issues. But one thing it does is to present

---

\* Uppsala University, Sweden, matti.eklund@filosofi.uu.se



problems for what I call *ardent realism*, a view which I believe often underlies what realists about normativity say and hold.

Several theorists have suggested that expressivism somehow provides a way out of the problem I present, and my main aim here is to evaluate this suggestion.<sup>1</sup> My conclusions are negative. Expressivism does not provide a way out. Or, more carefully: it does not provide a way out not already afforded by other views, and that I have not already discussed in the context of discussing such other views. I am skeptical of there being any reasonable way out at all, but that is a bigger issue.

My view, that expressivism is unhelpful, may seem trivially correct given the brief summary I have given. The main target of my argument is ardent realism, something associated with realism about normativity, and expressivism is standardly seen as an alternative to realism. But, as I will get to, what distinguishes ardent realism from other kinds of normative realism is a certain kind of commitment to objectivity in normative matters, and it is at least not out of the question to hold that an expressivist view can be appealed to in support of this kind of objectivity, despite how expressivism in other ways is in opposition to realism. I think the view that expressivism might help is false, but the view is at least not an obvious non-starter.

Much in this introduction is abstract, and cryptic for anyone who is not yet familiar with the issues I bring up. In what way is ought\* an alternative to ought? What is ardent realism and what is the kind of objectivity at issue? Let me, as already promised, start by explaining the problem I want to focus on in more detail.

## 2. Conflicting alternatives

Let me start by introducing the notion of normative role. “Normative role”, as I use the label, is a covering term for whatever it is about the use of normative expressions that distinguishes their use from the use of non-normative expressions. One view on normative role and reference is that if two concepts are associated with the same normative role, they have the same reference – ascribe the same property. This is a view one might accept or reject. Let two normative expressions or concepts be *conflicting alternatives* if and only if they have the same normative role but differ in what property they ascribe.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Theorists who have done so in print are Golub (2022) and Köhler (2019), the latter in a review of Eklund (2017).

<sup>2</sup> I adopt the nice label “conflicting alternatives” from McDaniel (2020), but McDaniel goes on to explicate the notion in a different way.

Suppose there are conflicting alternatives. Suppose, more specifically, that our concept ought has a conflicting alternative, ought\*, and that one ought to  $\phi$  but one ought\* to  $\psi$ . What then to do? Of course, 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 member of a community of “ought\*”-users would tell themselves. What we want, one might say, is a reason to go by what we ought to do rather than 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 we ought\* to do. And so on and so forth.

One way to dramatize the problem is by imagining a \*-community, not using our concepts but the alternative \*-concepts. Even if we know perfectly well what is right, what ought to be done, and what one has reason to do, they might know equally well what is *right\**, what *ought\** to be done, what one has *reason\** to do, etc. In terms of tracking truth, the communities are doing equally well: we are only tracking different truths. But they differ in that a community guided by considerations regarding what is right, etc., will be led to behave differently from a community guided by considerations regarding what is right\*. We might find what they do abhorrent, if abhorrent things are among the things that it is right\* to do; but they can react the same way to us.

The problem is that, intuitively, there is an *alarming symmetry* (to use Tristram McPherson’s useful phrase<sup>3</sup>). When we seek to compare the different normative concepts, the way to do so seems to be by employing other normative concepts. But since the issue affects them too – if normative concepts generally have conflicting alternatives, they too have conflicting alternatives – there is no way to get around the problem.

So far, I have not said anything to support the assumption that there really are possible conflicting alternatives of the kind indicated. So far all I have said, one can resist the problem by just denying that presupposition. One might say that normative role fixes reference, so that it is impossible that expressions have the same normative role but differ in reference. Introducing a bit of terminology that I use in (2017): one might say that the relevant concepts are *referentially normative*.<sup>4</sup> What is more, I have not said anything about the extent of any supposed conflict. If the conflict only arises in very special cases – if cases where what I ought to do isn’t exactly what I ought\* to do are few and far between and seemingly not of great importance – it may not be of great significance. There is a problem only if the conflict is more extensive.

---

<sup>3</sup> McPherson (2020).

<sup>4</sup> There are many complications regarding how exactly to formulate the idea that I here put in terms of normative role determining reference. See Eklund (2017), ch. 3, for discussion of some of these complications.

Let me briefly indicate some reasons one might have for thinking that normative role does not fix reference. One important point is that prominent theories of how the reference of normative terms is determined invoke other factors besides normative role. One example is how Cornell realists appeal to causal facts; another example is how neo-descriptivists appeal to folk theories linking normative terms to descriptive terms.<sup>5</sup> Another point is that, whatever in the end should be said, it can seem mysterious how normative role could fix reference: how can facts about action-guiding or motivating role do that kind of reference-fixing job?

However, suppose that the considerations just mentioned are on the wrong track, and normative role does fix reference. Then the problem, in the form in which I have raised it, is avoided. I raised the problem in terms of conflicting alternatives, and there are then no conflicting alternatives. But one can still worry, and seemingly reasonably, that problems similar in spirit remain. In (2017), I brought up the issue of similar problems that remain: the problem of *embarrassment of riches*.<sup>6</sup> For example, consider an alternative community like the \*-community considered earlier in that what falls under their positive normative concepts is different from what falls under ours, but is unlike the \*-community in that their normative concepts are in no straightforward way counterparts of our normative concepts. This community is then more exotic. But still their system of normative concepts does seem to be in an extended sense a conflicting alternative to ours. Upon realizing that there are these different systems of normative concepts, one can wish to ask oneself which system of normative concepts to employ. The difficulties in actually raising this question mirror difficulties already brought up: no matter how we try to raise the question we will use normative concepts from one or other of the systems, but then we fail to state the question.

The remarks in the two previous paragraphs speak to the question of what to say about the very existence of conflicting alternatives. I have mentioned reasons to believe that conflicting alternatives do exist, and I have also indicated how the problem at issue might arise even if in fact there are no conflicting alternatives as characterized. These remarks also apply to concerns about the extent of the conflict. Arguments to the effect that normative role does not determine reference function, *mutatis mutandis*, as arguments to the effect that normative role does not significantly constrain reference. Arguments to the effect that versions of the problem remain even if normative role actually determines reference also function as arguments to the effect that the problems remain even if normative role significantly constrains reference.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Boyd (1988) and Frank Jackson (1998), respectively. For discussion of these views on reference, see Eklund (2017), ch. 2.

<sup>6</sup> I will stick with that label here. But North-Concar (2024) introduces the better label *revenge pluralism*.

### 3. Ardent realism

So far I have been concerned to lay out a possible problem, and to make the case that it is plausible that there is a problem there. But I have not said anything about exactly who the supposed problem is a problem for. Even if it is plausible that there is a potential problem here, it is not clear that everyone needs to regard it as such. It is certainly open to someone to hold that it is just a fact that there are these alternative concepts, that there are facts both about what ought to be done and about what ought\* to be done, and that the supposed “further” question just is a chimera. In fact, this may be my own view. The supposed problem is a problem for theorists who seem committed to holding something else.

Realism – moral, or more generally *normative*, realism – as standardly characterized in the literature says that normative sentences are truth-apt, and that some atomic normative sentences are objectively, mind-independently true. It is occasionally added that they must be true not just in a minimalist sense. Realism as thus characterized – call it *mere* realism – is perfectly compatible with there being both objective ought-facts and objective ought\*-facts, and with there being nothing to break the seeming alarming symmetry. So the supposed problem I have raised is not a problem for mere realism.

But I think it is intuitive, or at least intuitive for many realists, that some actions, or states of affairs, are, so to speak, favored from the point of view of reality. This intuitive thought is impressionistic and inchoate. However, it is clear enough what is intended that we can see that the problem sketched is a problem for the intuitive thought. One might have thought it obviously sufficient for an action being favored from the point of view of reality if it is mind-independently the case that it *ought* to be performed. But if other actions are such that they ought\* to be performed, then what is to say that reality prefers the actions that ought to be performed to the actions that ought\* to be performed? One word that plays the relevant role for one community picks out one property; a word that plays that role for another community picks out another property. What is to say that reality favors one over the other? In my (2017) I called a realist who wants to respect the intuitive thought at issue an *ardent realist*.<sup>7</sup> The problem described is a potential problem for the ardent realist (potentially among other theorists).

The ardent realist wants to say that there’s more to normativity in the world than that there’s what’s right and what’s right\* and that’s that. Somehow, some normative concepts/properties are, in some relevant way, *privileged*. But what might this privilege amount to? “Privilege” is here just a label. Use of this label is

---

<sup>7</sup> Eklund (2017), p. 1.

compatible with skepticism about whether it has content, and there is good reason to worry that it does not in fact have any content. If the concept privilege is normative, then will it not have a conflicting alternative, so that even if our concepts are privileged, theirs are privileged\*? But if a concept does have a conflicting alternative like this, does it really express what we are seeking? Let me elaborate. Here is a dilemma. Either privilege is a descriptive concept or it is a normative concept (where “descriptive” is meant to contrast with “normative”). If it is taken to be a normative concept – e.g., “the privileged concepts are the ones we *ought* to employ” – the alarming symmetry arises also with respect to privilege. Corresponding to privilege there is privilege\*, understood in the obvious way. Suppose then that privilege is instead a descriptive concept. A first concern is that appeal to privilege does not seem to address what is at issue. When I decide whether to use ought or ought\* to guide my actions, what I am wondering is not what “is F”, where “F” expresses some descriptive concept. A second concern is that the issue of alternatives does not go away. Suppose I propose to identify privilege as some descriptive concept D. What can be said, even in principle, to an objector who instead proposed to identify it as D\*? (It might be tempting, of course, to fall back on claims of the form *we ought to care about D rather than D\**, but given the essential employment of “ought”, this is obviously unhelpful.)

What can the ardent realist say in response to the challenge presented (henceforth: *the alternative concepts challenge*)? One option is to employ *the direct strategy*. The direct strategy involves saying that it is possible to make adequate sense of the notion of privilege. This involves saying that even if there are alternative concepts as described, the dilemma outlined can be avoided. Another option is to employ *the metasemantic strategy*. This is the strategy, alluded to earlier, of appealing to theories about reference-determination in order to rule out the possibility of there being seriously conflicting alternatives of the kind characterized. The idea is that the relevant concepts are referentially normative. The discussion in my (2017) focuses chiefly on the metasemantic strategy. The main reason for this focus is that I am pessimistic about the direct strategy. If there really are the conflicting alternatives mentioned, then, for the reasons given, it seems impossible even to state the issue of which concepts are privileged. This is of course not to say that the metasemantic strategy actually works. In the previous section, I mentioned some problems raised.

A strategy distinct from both strategies mentioned is to allow (contra the metasemantic strategy) that there are the alternative concepts at issue, and to allow (contra the direct strategy) that no relevant notion of privilege can be expressed – but insist that there is such a thing as privilege although it is ineffable.<sup>8</sup> However,

---

<sup>8</sup> See Eklund (2017), pp. 23ff.

I mention this *ineffability strategy* only for the sake of completeness. It does seem rather desperate. It involves saying that there is an issue there, but it is absolutely impossible to say – and hence, presumably, to *think* – what the issue is.

#### 4. Expressivism and objective backing

What separates ardent realism from mere realism is a yearning for certain kind of objectivity. Mere realism is compatible with a kind of what I have dubbed alarming symmetry; the ardent realist wants to say that reality itself favors some actions over others, and it is not merely that some actions ought to be performed, others ought\* to be performed, and that is that.

Let me call that which distinguishes ardent realism from mere realism the idea of *objective backing*. I have emphasized that realism does not by itself imply that there is objective backing: one can be a realist without being an ardent realist. Can one also be “ardent” without being a realist? That is, can one accept the claims that distinguish ardent realism from mere realism without accepting everything that is part of realism? It seems that this is principle possible.<sup>9</sup>

Consider expressivism. Expressivism, as it tends to be discussed, is the conjunction of two claims:

(E1) Moral thought is non-representational.

(E2) The meaning of a moral sentence is a function of the role it plays as a device for expressing moral thought.<sup>10</sup>

As is well-known, there are good questions that can be raised about what (E1) comes to. On a natural understanding of whether some thought or sentence is representational, this is a matter of whether it has truth-conditions, but many contemporary expressivists of course agree that moral thoughts have truth-conditions. And if one understands (E1) to mean merely that moral thoughts have truth-conditions in virtue of some more fundamental, non-representational features, then one seems to lose something distinctive of expressivism: for then for example anyone who gives a conceptual-role account of the contents of moral thoughts risks ending up being classified as an expressivist. But even if questions can be raised about (E1) I will treat it as sufficiently clear to proceed.

As I will elaborate on below, it seems that one can – at least in principle – be an expressivist, while still holding that somehow, some normative concepts are privileged in the (elusive) sense at issue here. If so, one holds on to the idea of

---

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion of ardent non-realism in section 8.3 of Eklund (2017).

<sup>10</sup> This exact characterization is quoted from Perez Carballo (2014).

objective backing even if one is not an actual realist. Maybe distinctly expressivist resources can be what are needed to show that there is something breaking any seeming alarming symmetry (the direct strategy) or that expressions with the same normative role are guaranteed to have the same reference (the metasemantic strategy).

Now, objective backing, while explained only impressionistically, was explained in terms of, for example, what *reality favors*. That kind of slogan, impressionistic though it may be, may be thought to rule out expressivism. It may be thought that for *reality* to favor  $\phi$ -ing, there must be mind-independent facts such that given those facts  $\phi$ -ing is favored, and this kind of reliance on mind-independent facts is incompatible with expressivism. But I think that whatever in the end should be said about expressivism and objective backing, a quick dismissal such as this would be mistaken. To use a relatively simple example, consider the stance of R. M. Hare.<sup>11</sup> Hare is not exactly an expressivist, since he focuses not on attitude expressed but on prescriptivity, but his view is close enough to contemporary expressivism to be relevant. Like the expressivist, the prescriptivist Hare takes moral language to be characterized by its non-descriptive function. On Hare's conception, moral judgments are prescriptive, universalizable and overriding. On the basis of these general supposed features of the nature of moral judgments, Hare seeks to derive a version of consequentialism. One may think that if indeed Hare's attempted derivation succeeds, consequentialism has some sort of objective backing – consequentialism is shown to be true by impersonal considerations endorsable from any perspective – and consequentialism is in this sense favored by reality, even though there is no appeal to what independent moral facts are like anywhere in the story.

Of course, objections to Hare's reasoning can be raised. And even assuming that Hare's reasoning is cogent as far as it goes, the conclusion is only that "moral" judgments, with their specific features, have the features described by him. It is in the spirit of the alternative concepts challenge to raise questions like: what relevantly privileges the making of moral judgments over making alternative ("moral\*") kinds of judgments? The point of bringing up Hare is just to show how an expressivist, or a similar kind of theorist, might reason.

So the expressivist may be as concerned as the traditional realist to defend that which separates ardent realism from mere realism. She may be as interested in securing objective backing. There is nothing in her view that immediately rules out objective backing.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Hare (1981), and, for helpful commentary, Sinnott-Armstrong (2001). Hare is discussed in Eklund (2017), p. 153.

One might then wonder: might the expressivist somehow or other be in a *better* position than a traditional realist when it comes to responding to the alternative concepts challenge and securing objective backing? From this point on, I will address this question in some detail. Let me first bring up, only to set aside, an obviously mistaken idea. Having done so, I will turn to more promising suggestions.

Some critics of expressivism have in different ways argued that the expressivist is committed to accepting subjectivist-sounding claims of the form

(1)  $\phi$ -ing is good iff I approve of  $\phi$ -ing.

There are prominent responses to such criticisms. Theorists like, for example, Simon Blackburn and Mark Schroeder have convincingly argued that expressivism is by no means committed to such a thing. A central part of the reply involves emphasizing that for the expressivist, claims of the form (1) are themselves normative claims, to affirm (1) is to affirm a particular kind of subjectivist normative claim, and expressivism is itself a metanormative theory, silent on normative claims.<sup>12</sup>

The mistaken idea that I want to set aside is that these points also help when it comes to objective backing. Even if arguments like those of Blackburn and Schroeder are perfectly cogent, all that they show is that the expressivist can mimic what I have called mere realism in a particular way: she can affirm mind-independence in the way the mere realist can. But a central point of the alternative concepts challenge is that mere realism is not sufficient for ardent realism. Analogously, securing the result that the expressivist can mimic what the mere realist says is not sufficient for her to vindicate the idea of objective backing.<sup>13</sup>

It may be suggested that just as the expressivist can mimic the *mere* realist, she can mimic the *ardent* realist. That is, just as she can get to say the characteristic things the mere realist says, she can get to say the characteristic things the ardent realist wants to say. But there are general problems regarding such a strategy. While it is clear what the mere realist wants to say, part of the very point of the alternative normative concepts challenge is that it just is not clear what can be sufficient for ardent realism. But then it is not clear what the expressivist could reasonably seek to mimic.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Blackburn (1999) and Schroeder (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Compare too Golub (2022), p. 482.

<sup>14</sup> Also, if the aim is to actually *defend* what I have called objective backing, merely *mimicking* what the ardent realist says is not obviously enough. Compare what is going on in the case of mere realism. The typical expressivist does not want to defend mere realism; she only wants to say some characteristic things the mere realist says.

I do offer metaphorical and impressionistic descriptions of what ardent realism demands. I speak in terms of, for example, what reality favors. An expressivist can perhaps say that she can mimic *that*. But an obvious problem with such a strategy is that it is in the nature of these metaphorical and impressionistic descriptions that they in principle allow for all sorts of different readings. At one extreme, one can hold that for reality to favor  $\phi$ -ing just is for it to be the case that one objectively ought to  $\phi$ . If so, then so long as the expressivist can get to say “one objectively ought to  $\phi$ ”, she can say that which characterizes ardent realism, namely that there are some things that reality favors. But expressivism is hardly needed for this. If the talk of what reality favors can be cashed in terms of what one objectively ought to do, then that is enough to defuse the alternative concepts challenge. For the supposed fact that there also are objective facts about what one ought\* to do does not in any way problematize, and is not meant to problematize, the idea that there are objective facts about what one ought to do.

Let me now turn to a different kind of suggestion. This is one I will discuss at some more length: it can be thought that there can be something about expressivism that makes the metasemantic response more plausible than it otherwise would be.

First, it can be held that expressivism makes it more plausible than it otherwise would be to take normative concepts, or at least thin, unadulterated ones, to be in some relevant sense fully characterized by their normative roles, in a way that helps the metasemantic strategy.<sup>15</sup> To take just one example, one of the most prominent expressivists, Allan Gibbard, stresses what he calls the “last ought before action”.<sup>16</sup> When all the facts are in and one asks oneself what to do, this can equally well be expressed as *what ought I to do?*, in one recognizable sense of “ought”. It may be thought that Gibbard’s “last ought before action” is exactly the kind of concept upon whose existence the metasemantic strategy relies: it is a concept that does not have any possible alternatives of the relevant kind. The idea of engaging in normative thought but not having a concept with this role does not make sense, someone might say.

However, *none* of the concerns raised regarding the metasemantic strategy concerns the *plausibility* of there being a concept like this. Perhaps there is such a concept, and perhaps Gibbard has identified it. However, this clearly does not amount to granting that all concepts with this normative role must have the same reference. Whether all thinkers capable of normative thought must possess a concept associated with R is one thing; whether those concepts all have the same *reference* is another.

---

<sup>15</sup> About “thin, unadulterated”: what is suggested in the main text is much more plausible regarding so-called thin normative concepts such as OUGHT and RIGHT than regarding so-called thick normative concepts like GENEROUS and BRUTAL.

<sup>16</sup> Gibbard (2003).

But, second, the expressivist might be thought to have something to say also about the issue of sameness of reference. It can be suggested that the expressivist somehow has special reason to think that even if one can speak of the reference of (thin, unadulterated) normative expressions, the referential features of such normative expressions are mere reflections of their normative roles, whence the idea of expressions with the same normative roles but with different reference is misguided. However, how exactly could it be the case that all concepts associated with the same normative role have the same reference? And what role might expressivism play there?

One way for all concepts associated with the same normative role to have the same reference is if they are all indeterminate in the same way. In the extreme case, all such concepts could be indeterminate among an extremely wide variety of candidate referents. But I take it that anyone who wants to secure objective backing would want to hold that the reference of the relevant concepts is relatively determinate.

One possibility might be that something *about the world*, independently of our attitudes, makes this the case. There is perhaps a question about whether appeal to something like this even is available to the expressivist. But even if it is, it is hardly specific to the expressivist, so appeal to this is not a distinctly expressivist strategy.

Another possibility is that something about the nature and structure of the normative role associated with, for example, ought makes it the case that every concept associated with this normative role has the same, relatively determinate reference. Compare again how, according to Hare, the prescriptivity, universalizability and overridingness jointly determine reference. But first, again this strategy does not seem specific to expressivism. Second, it seems that any strategy of this kind has a hope of succeeding only if the normative role in question has a fairly *specific* nature, as for Hare it does. Any appeal to such specific normative roles positively invites embarrassment of riches worries: for it is then natural to wonder about concepts with alternative normative roles, not having exactly this specific set of features but instead with a different set of features.

There is a third, quite different route, which appeals to considerations about the nature of truth. Appealing to a form of minimalism about truth, the expressivist can say that ““p” is true” expresses the same mental state as “p”, and then if “one ought to  $\phi$ ” expresses approval of  $\phi$ -ing so does ““one ought to  $\phi$ ” is true”. And if “one ought\* to  $\phi$ ” expresses approval of  $\phi$ -ing so does ““one ought\* to  $\phi$ ” is true”. But given this, then a speaker is in a position to affirm that “one ought\* to  $\phi$ ” is true exactly when she approves of  $\phi$ -ing in the right way – which also is when she appropriately judges that one ought to  $\phi$ . It seems that this is a way for the expressivist to arrive at the conclusion that what one ought\* to do is exactly what one ought to do. But

even granted all this, it seems quite useless in the present context. It only reflects that a speaker expresses approval in the same way both when using ought and when using ought\*. Why think that this has anything to do with securing objective backing?

### 5. Golub on expressivism and objective backing

Thus far I have discussed in general terms the possibility that expressivism might secure objective backing. In general terms, the main points have been these. Some suggestions along these lines are clearly mistaken: they do not even promise to secure what they are being claimed to secure. A paradigmatic example is the suggestion that the expressivist's strategy for getting to say some specific things that the realist characteristically says might help. Other suggestions are not so clearly mistaken qua general strategies, but they are not distinctively expressivist suggestions. A realist might say the same sort of thing, and just as plausibly.

Thus far my discussion of expressivism has been conducted in general terms. In this section I turn to Camil Golub (2022), which argues at some length that expressivism helps secure objective backing.<sup>17</sup> Golub's overall conclusion is that "Quasi-naturalism [Golub's favoured brand of expressivist quasi-realism] can vindicate ardent realism in the face of Eklund's challenge by ruling out the possibility of alternative authoritatively normative concepts".<sup>18</sup> This is obviously very much in line with the expressivist strategy already discussed. I will not attempt to provide an overall summary of what Golub says but only discuss the parts of his discussion that may seem directly relevant to the preceding. In brief, my conclusions regarding Golub will be of the same kind as the general conclusions already drawn regarding the appeal to expressivism. Some suggestions emerging from his discussion seem mistaken. Other suggestions seem clearly better but do not seem to amount to any advance over what already the non-expressivist realist might suggest.

Golub favors a Kratzer-style contextualist semantics for "ought" of a kind that has become standard.<sup>19</sup> One aspect of this contextualist semantics is that there is an ordering source which ranks worlds by how well they satisfy certain standards. When it comes to the relevant kinds of normative uses of "ought", the ordering source has to do with "acceptable standards" of practical reasoning. Summarizing his view,

---

<sup>17</sup> Golub's expressivism differs in some way from other kinds, but I think the differences are of little consequence as far as the general issue of objective backing is concerned, so I will abstract away from some details regarding Golub's positive view.

<sup>18</sup> Golub (2022), p. 485. Golub speaks of the authoritatively normative in order to distinguish the normativity at issue from (e.g.) the normativity of predicates pertaining to etiquette.

<sup>19</sup> See Kratzer (2012). Golub specifically relies on Ridge (2014).

he says that “Normative realists can adopt this semantic model and claim that the ordering source in authoritatively normative contexts of use consists in objectively acceptable standards of practical reasoning...” and that on his hybrid expressivist, view an “ought”-sentence such as “You ought to give a large part of your income to charity” will, “if used in an authoritatively normative sense”, express “a relational mental state comprising a normative perspective and the belief that donating a large part of your income to charity is highly ranked by any acceptable standard of practical reasoning”.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of an “acceptable standard” looms large. There is an obvious possible concern regarding Golub’s reliance on such a notion. Can’t the alternative concepts challenge be raised also regarding the notion of “acceptable standard”? If it cannot then certainly anyone who seeks to secure objective backing, whether realist or expressivist, can appeal to that fact when responding to the alternative concepts challenge. But the alternative concepts challenge does not hinge on specific features of “ought” so there is no reason to think “acceptable standard” is any better off.

A central argument that Golub provides is in the form of a dilemma. Either our concepts and some given alternative concepts are similar enough to be in “normative competition” or they are not. If they are not similar enough to be in normative competition, these alternative concepts are simply not relevant to consider. So suppose the concepts are in normative competition. In this case, Golub says,

Determining the correct reference of “ought,” both for us and for the other community, now becomes an internal normative question, to be settled with the tools of normative theorizing. That is, we can make a first-order normative case for why our claims involving “ought” are true and the claims of the other community are false, and this is in effect to argue that normative reality privileges our use of “ought”.<sup>21</sup>

Golub emphasizes what can be *settled* with the tools of normative theorizing. “Settle” is factive. If we can settle that p with the tools of normative theorizing, then it is true that p. But then I do not see what is lost by instead formulating matters directly in terms of what is true and not. The way to put Golub’s point is then: our claims involving “ought” are true and the other community’s claims involving (their) “ought” are false. But once matters are put this way, the question is: why would it be so? The same options as were discussed at the end of the last section are again

---

<sup>20</sup> Golub (2022), p. 488.

<sup>21</sup> Golub (2022), p. 493f.

the natural suggestions, and the same concerns as before are relevant. If the reason our claims are true and theirs are false is because that's just how the world is, the idea is not distinctly expressivist (and one might even wonder whether this route is available to the expressivist). If the reason has to do with the nature and structure of the normative role associated with ought, the same remarks as above are apt. And lastly, if the idea is to appeal to minimalism, it seems we have left objective backing behind, for the same reasons as mentioned above.

Maybe, in light of Golub's emphasis on normative theorizing and making a first-order case, the idea is that the reason our "ought"-claims are true and their claims are false is that this is what first-order inquiry tells us. The idea would be that while a natural view might be that it is because of what it is true and false that inquiry (conducted properly, and given the right circumstances) yields what it does, this can be turned on its head. What inquiry (conducted properly, etc.) yields determines what is true and false and not vice versa. Given this reversal, this strategy is different from one that simply appeals to what the world is like.

What should one say about this strategy? Distinguish between two different versions of the idea that what inquiry yields determines what is true and what is false. On the one hand, there is a relativist version of the view according to which the inquiry conducted by different inquirers yields different truths, and hence the truth is relative to different inquirers. On the other hand, there is a non-relativist version, according to which all inquiry meeting the relevant conditions yields the same truths. It is the latter, non-relativist possibility that would be relevant to the idea objective backing. The relativist version is anathema to that idea. But it is hard to see how there could fail to be any sort of explanation of why all inquiry meeting relevant conditions would issue the same results. And if the explanation doesn't appeal to what the world is like, the natural thing to appeal to would be the normative role of ought and how that serves to determine reference. But that is again the same idea as before, and subject to the same worries.

## **6. Another route from the alternative concepts challenge to expressivism?**

Thus far I have discussed, and criticized, the idea that expressivism helps secure what I have called objective backing in the face of the alternative concepts challenge, and that the alternative concepts challenge in that way helps motivate expressivism.

There is also a *very* different possible route from the alternative concepts challenge to expressivism. Assuming that there are the alternative normative concepts, along the lines of what I have discussed, it seems intuitively that after questions about

what ought to be done, what ought\* to be done, etc. have been settled, there is somehow a remaining question, one that it is tempting to express in terms of *what to do*. Am I to let my actions be guided by ought-considerations, or by ought\*-considerations, or...? Now, the locutions I just used – “what to do”, “am I to” – are somewhat special, and it is at least somewhat reasonable to suspect that these are just stylistic variations of corresponding locutions involving “ought”. If so, the questions described raise the very same issues as corresponding questions concerning what I ought to do: maybe I *ought* to be guided by ought-considerations, but at the same time I *ought\** to be guided by ought\*-considerations.

But suppose, as may be the case, that questions about “what to do” are not mere stylistic variations on corresponding ought-questions.

One possibility, even given this supposition, is that the alternative concepts challenge generalizes to the case of “what to do” even so. *What to do* is one thing but *what to do\** is another. Even having settled what to do, I can reasonably wonder whether what to do\* is something else, and this raises the same issues as were raised in the ought case.

However, one can also propose a kind of expressivism regarding “what to do”. The question of what to do corresponds to a decision rather than to a belief. Even if expressivism is not generally true of normative language, an expressivist construal of questions about “what to do” is correct. Asking whether to do what one ought to do or what one ought\* to do does make sense – it is a matter of deciding to do one or the other. This suggestion can also be used to explain, for someone rejecting the idea of objective backing, why there intuitively is a further question remaining even after it has been settled what one ought to do, what one ought\* to do, etc. The further question is simply the practical question of what to do. It is not a question of fact.<sup>22</sup>

In principle, there is much to say about whether something like what has just been sketched this really is plausible, and, if so, about the details concerning the type of expressivism that is motivated through this kind of reasoning. All I wish to stress for present purposes is that what is now being considered is obviously very different from the idea that expressivism can help secure objective backing. Expressivism is explored as a response to the alternative concepts challenge, but in quite a different way.

---

<sup>22</sup> What I am describing in the text is the kind of view that Justin Clarke-Doane (2020), ch. 6, and Risberg (2023) favor.

## 7. Concluding remarks

Here is what I take myself to have done here. First, I introduced the alternative concepts challenge and identified one specific target of the challenge: the so-called ardent realist. Then I turned to the possibility that expressivism might suggest a way out. An expressivist too might hold views threatened by the alternative concepts challenge: she might think our normative judgments have objective backing, in just the way the ardent realist thinks so. And the expressivist might perhaps be thought to have available an especially good strategy for securing objective backing even in light of the alternative concepts challenge. In the latter part of the paper I discussed this. My conclusions are negative. Some suggestions regarding what the special expressivist means might be are clearly mistaken. Others may be more promising but do not amount to any advance over what already the non-expressivist might say.

## REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Simon: 1999, "Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a Quasi-Realist Foundation", *Inquiry* 42: 213-27.
- Blackburn, Simon and Neil Sinclair: 2006, "Comments on Gibbard's Thinking How to Live", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72: 699–706.
- Blanchard, Joshua: 2020, "Moral Realism and Philosophical Angst", *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 15.
- Boyd, Richard: 1988, "How to be a Moral Realist", in Geoff Sayre-McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, pp. 181–228.
- Dasgupta, Shamik: 2017, "Normative Non-Naturalism and the Problem of Authority", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 117: 297-319.
- Dreier, Jamie: 2004, "Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism", *Philosophical Perspectives* 18: 23–44.
- Eklund, Matti: 2017, *Choosing Normative Concepts*, Oxford University Press.
- Eklund, Matti: 2020a, "Reply to Critics", *Inquiry* 63: 535-61.
- Eklund, Matti: 2020b, "The Normative Pluriverse", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 18: 121-46.
- Gibbard, Allan: 2003, *Thinking How to Live*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Golub, Camil: 2022, "Quasi-Naturalism and the Problem of Alternative Normative Concepts", *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 19: 474-500.
- Hare, R.M.: 1981, *Moral Thinking*, Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, Frank: 1998, *From Metaphysics to Ethics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

- Köhler, Sebastian: 2019, "Matti Eklund: Choosing Normative Concepts", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 22: 251-3.
- Kratzer, Angelika: 2012, *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives*, Oxford University Press.
- Leary, Stephanie: 2020, "Choosing Normative Properties: A Reply to Eklund's *Choosing Normative Concepts*", *Inquiry* 63: 455-74.
- McDaniel, Kristopher: 2020, "Matti Eklund's *Choosing Normative Concepts*", *Inquiry* 63: 475-88.
- McPherson, Tristram: 2018, "Authoritatively Normative Concepts", *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 13.
- McPherson, Tristram: 2020, "Ardent Realism Without Referential Normativity", *Inquiry* 63: 489-508.
- North-Concar, Oscar: 2024, *A Sensible Realism*, PhD thesis, University of Warwick.
- Ridge, Michael: 2014, *Impassioned Belief*, Oxford University Press.
- Risberg, Olle: 2023, "Ethics and the Question of What to Do", *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 25: 376-412.
- Schroeder, Mark: 2014, "Does Expressivism have Subjectivist Consequences", *Philosophical Perspectives* 28: 278-90.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter: 2001, "R.M. Hare (1919- )", in A.P. Martinich and David Sosa (eds.), *A Companion to Analytic Philosophy*, Blackwell.
- Wedgwood, Ralph: 2001, "Conceptual Role Semantics for Moral Terms", *Philosophical Review* 110: 1–30.
- Wedgwood, Ralph: 2007, *The Nature of Normativity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Wedgwood, Ralph: 2018, "The Unity of Normativity", in Daniel Star (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*, Oxford University Press, pp. 23-45.
- Williams, J. Robert G.: 2018, "Normative Reference Magnets", *Philosophical Review* 127: 41-71.