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PROJECT

Conceptual Ethics and the Foundations of Normativity

We engage in normative and evaluative thought and talk throughout our lives – roughly, thought and talk about what we should do, think, or feel, or about what is valuable or good. For example, we make claims about how we should treat other people, what the virtues and vices are of various social/political institutions, and what makes a scientific theory a rational one to believe. Some normative and evaluative concepts seem more “authoritative” than others. For example, the concept of the “all-things-considered ought” seems to pick out something more normatively important than the concept “legal obligation.” My project concerns a deep skeptical challenge about our existing seemingly most “authoritative” normative concepts. The challenge claims that these concepts fail to pick out the “most normatively important” parts of reality. If our most authoritative normative concepts are defective in this way, this would undercut our use of them across the board, including when evaluating other normative concepts, such as “justice” or “rationality.” The challenge thus threatens the normative foundations of all the normative and evaluative concepts that we use. This challenge connects to skeptical hypotheses discussed throughout the history of moral philosophy. However, the most well-known challenges concern our current normative concepts. In contrast, this challenge – which is equally important, but relatively neglected – concerns which concepts we should use. I will investigate this skeptical challenge as a way to illuminate the foundations of normativity and value, with a particular focus on connections to moral philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of law.

Recommended Reading

Plunkett, David. “Which Concepts Should We Use? Metalinguistic Negotiations and the Methodology of Philosophy.” *Inquiry* 58, nos. 7–8 (2015): 828–874. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2015.1080184>.

Plunkett, David, and Scott Shapiro. “Law, Morality, and Everything Else: General Jurisprudence as a Branch of Metanormative Inquiry.” *Ethics* 128, no. 1 (2017): 37–68. <https://doi.org/10.1086/692941>.

McPherson, Tristram, and David Plunkett. “Evaluation Turned on Itself: The Vindicatory Circularity Challenge to the Conceptual Ethics of Normativity.” In *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 16, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 207–232. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192897466.001.0001>.

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