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REVIEW ESSAY

The Latest Epicycle? Queloz's Conceptual Ethics

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Abstract
This critical notice assesses Matthieu Queloz's *The Ethics of Conceptualization*, highlighting its compelling pragmatist account of concepts as tools shaped by human needs. It argues, however, that Queloz's reasons for concept use do not constitute a fundamentally new kind of normative reason but instead recast familiar questions about normative authority at the conceptual level.

Keywords: conceptual ethics; conceptual engineering; metaethics; normative authority

1. Introduction

Stephen Finlay (2025) recently suggested that metaethics is caught in a cycle of structurally similar arguments conducted in changing vocabularies. Drawing on the Buddhist metaphor of Samsara's Wheel, he argues that apparent innovations in the field may amount to little more than the beginning of another epicycle.

Matthieu Queloz's new book on conceptual ethics is insightful, clear, and impressively well-crafted (Queloz, 2025). It also calls to mind Finlay's worry about metaethics' recurring epicycles, since it revisits many familiar metaethical questions under the increasingly influential banner of conceptual engineering. Which concepts should we accept—that is, include in our conceptual repertoire? What determines a concept's "authority to shape our thought and conduct?" (32)? This "authority question" is the springboard of Queloz's investigation. To answer it, he develops an account of concept appraisal centered on "conceptual needs," which are generated by our concerns, capacities, and environment.

Before turning to some critical remarks, let me emphasize that there is much to admire in this book. Above all, it has a remarkably broad intellectual horizon. Queloz combines ideas from pragmatism, philosophy of language, ethics, and political philosophy with insights from several empirical disciplines. The resulting account is philosophically ambitious and relevant to a wide range of contemporary debates.

Perhaps one theme is especially worth singling out. I take the book's most important philosophical achievement to lie in its thoroughly pragmatist perspective on concepts as tools of thought and in its explanation of why we need vague and theoretically flawed concepts (esp. Ch. 6). As interdependent creatures facing persistent conflicts of interest, desire, and value, we need concepts that enable us to negotiate these conflicts in everyday life. Our concepts, Queloz argues, *must* be vague and flawed in certain respects if they are to fulfill this function. Consequently, one of the central mistakes of concept engineering consists in "tidy-minded" (Ch. 5) attempts to make our conceptual repertoire maximally precise and to rid it of all its theoretical imperfections.[1]

[1]Queloz here offers a set of arguments that underscore Philipp Kitcher's (2023) recent criticism of analytic philosophy.

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This pragmatist account of concepts is a substantive and important contribution, whether or not one ultimately agrees with all of its details. I found the middle chapters of the book (Chs. 6–8), in which Queloz develops this account of concept appraisal, the most compelling.

In the final two chapters (9 and 10), Queloz applies his account to the concepts LIBERTY and VOLUNTARY, with insightful results. Particularly illuminating is his discussion of LIBERTY. Drawing on Bernard Williams, Queloz argues convincingly against Dworkin that a concept of liberty must leave room for contesting prevailing understandings of rightful freedom (352). A maximally precise, "tidy-minded" definition would undermine precisely this critical function. These concluding chapters provide an instructive demonstration of how Queloz's general framework can be brought to bear on concrete philosophical debates.

Throughout, Queloz proceeds in bold and engaging steps rather than getting lost in analytic detail, making the book a stimulating contribution to conceptual ethics.

One minor reservation concerns the book's presentation. Given the impressive range of literature it engages with, the discussion occasionally contains so many cross-references that the argumentative thread becomes difficult to follow. It is not always easy to distinguish Queloz's historical interpretation of earlier thinkers from his own systematic contributions. While such engagements often enrich the discussion—as, for example, in the book's illuminating treatment of Williams and Dworkin—they occasionally feel somewhat overextended. One sometimes wonders whether Goethe's Mephistopheles (38), Shakespeare (228), or Heraclitus (238) really advance the philosophical argument or merely testify once more to the book's extraordinary erudition.

2. A Humean, Naturalist, Pragmatist Account of Concept Appraisal

Concepts are tools that shape our thought and conduct. Because we can reflect on and revise our conceptual repertoires, it is worth asking which concepts we should accept—that is, include in our conceptual repertoire—and which we should abandon. This is Queloz's *authority question* (43–47). His answer appeals to reasons for concept use, which he characterizes as "a special class of reasons that are orthogonal to, and yet can underpin or undermine, the reasons for action and belief that figure in our deliberations" (13).

From the outset, Queloz makes clear what his answer to the authority question will *not* rely on, namely "mind-independent rational foundations" (19). Instead, reasons for concept use depend on our conceptual needs, which in turn depend on the concerns we "critically identify" with (23). As he puts it:

> A reason for us to use the concept *F* is that, given our concerns, limited capacities, and circumstances as characterized without drawing on the concept *F*, we need to use the concept *F*. (69)

The resulting account is broadly Humean and naturalistic: reasons for concept use are ultimately grounded in human concerns rather than in anything mind-independent. Since Queloz aims to identify a new class of *normative* reasons, familiar meta-normative questions about their authority inevitably arise. I will come back to this point.

After introducing the authority question, Queloz turns to what he calls the "autoethnographic stance." Its distinctive feature is that it enables a disengaged assessment of concepts against the background of our wider concerns (67, 69). While I found the general direction of this discussion convincing, I was less persuaded that the stance is as novel as Queloz suggests. Rudolf Carnap, after all, already proposed evaluating conceptual frameworks from an external perspective by appealing to what he called pragmatic reasons.[2]

[2]See Carnap (1950). Given the similarity between the two projects, it remains somewhat unclear whether Queloz's reasons for concept use differ in any important respect from Carnapian pragmatic reasons. I did not find the brief remarks on "merely pragmatic" considerations later in the book (377) sufficient to clarify the relationship between the two accounts.

How exactly, then, should we appraise concepts? First, we must figure out our conceptual needs. A concept is *needed* by a group of concept users just when the concept is "especially conducive to the satisfaction of a concern […] that [the group] critically identifies with" (215). To clarify, Queloz distinguishes three "needfulness conditions": a group's (i) *concerns*, (ii) *capacities*, and (iii) *environment* (222). To represent these conditions, he introduces need matrices (Ch. 7.4), which are meant to provide an "uncluttered and perspicuous" representation of the concerns, capacities, and circumstances jointly sufficient to generate a conceptual need (232).

While I sympathize with the general idea of assessing concepts relative to human concerns, I was not persuaded that need matrices contribute much beyond redescribing what has already been stated in plain English. Queloz presents his formalizations as "uncluttered and perspicuous" representations of conceptual needs (232). But since the explanatory work is done entirely by the underlying story about concerns, capacities, and environments, formalizing this story in terms of need matrices did not strike me as particularly helpful.

Consider Queloz's own example of the concept POISONOUS (240). Human beings are concerned to avoid bodily harm, inhabit an environment containing harmful substances, and possess the capacity to communicate about them. This already nicely explains why creatures like us need the concept POISONOUS. It is difficult to see what philosophical insight is gained by redescribing these considerations as a formally represented need matrix <*co, ca, ci*> (232, 234, 237).

More generally, once we appreciate the breadth of empirical work that Queloz rightly regards as relevant to identifying conceptual needs—including anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology, and history (236)—it becomes difficult to see how need matrices could significantly simplify the task. Queloz risks suggesting a degree of methodological precision that the underlying inquiry cannot realistically attain. Determining group-relative conceptual needs will inevitably remain a messy and largely empirical undertaking.[3]

3. A New Epicycle?

Throughout the book, Queloz's technical vocabulary of conceptual engineering, conceptual needs, and metaconceptual reflection from the autoethnographic stance can obscure how familiar the underlying philosophical issue is. Although the authority question concerning concept use serves as the book's point of departure for a journey into supposedly uncharted territory, it is recognizably a familiar question about normative authority: what grounds the authority of reasons for using or abandoning concepts? Queloz's answer is broadly Humean and pragmatist: reasons for concept use derive their authority from the concerns of creatures like us in a world like ours. One naturally wonders, then, whether we are witnessing another turn of Finlay's metaethical wheel. To assess this suspicion, let us examine the account more closely.

For starters, Queloz's account rests on an inferentialist understanding of concepts.[4] The content of a concept is constituted, at least in part, by the inferential relations in which it figures. Mastering a concept therefore consists in grasping the inferences it licenses and excludes. For example, to possess the concepts KING and PRINCE is not merely to associate them with isolated definitions but to appreciate a network of inferential relations: every king is a monarch, princes are not necessarily kings, and a prince may become a king by succeeding to a throne. On an inferentialist picture, mastering these concepts involves acquiring dispositions to reason in these characteristic ways. These inferential transitions are distinct from practical endorsements. The concept KING does not

[3]Queloz later introduces the distinction between "*pro tanto*" and "*all-things-considered*" conceptual needs (239), where the former may have to be weighed against each other to get to the latter (268–9)—which renders the whole enterprise even more difficult.

[4]See, for example, Brandom (2000), Price et al. (2013), and Tiefensee (2021, 2023). Queloz does not explicitly endorse inferentialism as a comprehensive semantic theory, but the relevant passages strongly suggest that he takes the content of concepts to be constituted, at least in part, by the inferential transitions they license (38–40).

by itself license support for monarchies or republicanism; rather, it licenses characteristic inferential relations within reasoning.

Granting this much, however, does not yet establish Queloz's central claim. Inferentialism explains why concepts matter: because they structure our reasoning. But it remains unclear why this requires introducing a *distinctive class* of normative reasons for concept use. At most, the inferentialist picture shows that concepts play an indispensable role in our epistemic and practical lives. It does not by itself show that reasons for accepting or abandoning concepts differ in kind from more familiar reasons for belief, action, or inquiry.

Queloz reinforces his claim by characterizing reasons for concept use as "second-order reasons" or "reasons for reasons" (13, 17). The underlying thought is straightforward enough. Since concepts determine which inferences we are prepared to make, reasons concerning our conceptual repertoire operate at a different level from "ordinary" practical or epistemic reasons.

I am not convinced, however, that this establishes the intended conclusion. Once we start reflecting on our conceptual repertoire, it is unsurprising that we find reasons for employing some conceptual resources rather than others. But this does not by itself establish a difference in normative kind. The fact that some reasons bear on our conceptual repertoire rather than directly on beliefs or actions does not yet show that they constitute a fundamentally new class of normative reasons that is "orthogonal" to more familiar ones.

But Queloz insists that reasons for concept use constitute a distinctive kind of reason, even if the philosophical literature has not explicitly discussed them under this label. He writes:

> Utilitarian theorists, for example, find reasons for reasons in the fact that the use of certain concepts tends to contribute more to overall utility. (50)

This description seems unnecessarily complicated. The utilitarian's reasoning is more straightforwardly understood as identifying practical reasons to employ or revise particular concepts: if using a concept promotes overall utility, that fact counts in favor of using it. It remains unclear why such reasons should be redescribed as second-order "reasons for reasons" rather than as ordinary practical reasons for *using* some concepts rather than others or for *revising* our conceptual repertoires.

A similar worry arises in Queloz's brief discussion of the concept HYPOCRISY. To motivate the authority question about concept use, he imagines someone responding to the accusation of hypocrisy by asking: "Why should I accept that concept to begin with?" (43). The example is meant to show that questions about concept use arise *independently* of ordinary first-order normative questions.

However, I am not persuaded that this example succeeds. The natural question seems to be: why should I care about being hypocritical? Once an answer to that question is available, it is difficult to see what further philosophical work remains for the concept-related question to do. Whatever reasons there are for objecting to hypocrisy would also appear to count in favor of retaining some conceptual resource that enables us to identify and criticize it. Conversely, reasons for rejecting a harmful or discriminatory conceptualization would seem to depend on independent reasons for opposing the attitudes and practices that it sustains.

More generally, I suspect that Queloz's concept-level questions are best understood as reformulations of more familiar object-level questions. Instead of asking

> Why should I care about *X*?

Queloz invites us to ask

> Why should I accept the concept *X*?

But unless the concept-level question generates answers that differ in substance from those given to the object-level question, it is difficult to see what philosophical insight is gained by turning to the

concept level. Within a broadly Humean framework, both questions appear to receive the same answer: an appeal to the concerns of creatures like us in a world like ours. If so, the shift from the object level to the concept level does not introduce a new source of normative authority or a new kind of reason, but merely relocates the discussion.

This is not to deny that Queloz's account differs in important respects from other broadly Humean approaches to normative authority. Williams grounds normative authority in an agent's motivational set (Williams, 1981), Railton appeals to idealized desire and his resonance constraint (Railton, 2009), and Street explains normative authority in terms of evaluative attitudes shaped by evolutionary history (Street, 2006). Queloz, by contrast, grounds reasons for concept use in conceptual needs generated by the concerns of creatures like us in an environment like ours. These are substantive theoretical differences. My point is simply that these appear to be competing broadly Humean answers to the *same meta-normative question*, not answers to fundamentally different questions. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that a number of passages in the book can strike readers as another turn of Samsara's metaethical wheel.[5]

Early in the book, Queloz acknowledges that his authority question about concept use can be formulated in more familiar terms; it can be asked in "various well-established ways" (44). To illustrate, he discusses someone commending a spice for being *natural* and someone justifying their behavior toward another person by saying that she is a *woman*. In both cases, Queloz suggests that the speaker may be met with the reply: "Why is that a reason?" (44). Somewhat surprisingly, however, Queloz treats this as another way of posing his concept-related authority question, explaining that "in each case, one speaker relies on a *conceptualization* that the other challenges" (44).

This description of the cases seems somewhat artificial. What Queloz describes as a disagreement about conceptualizations appears more straightforwardly understood as an ordinary disagreement about practical reasons. One party holds that a spice's being natural counts in favor of using it, while the other denies this. One party holds that someone's being a woman counts in favor of treating her in a certain way, while the other rejects this. Again, it is telling that, within the broadly Humean framework Queloz endorses, these disputes would have to be resolved in the same way whether we adopt the object-level or the concept-level description: by appealing to the concerns of creatures like us in a world like ours. If so, Queloz's authority question does not identify a genuinely novel meta-normative problem requiring a new kind of normative reason, but rather relocates a familiar problem to the level of concepts.

None of this diminishes the originality of Queloz's account of concept appraisal itself. On the contrary, his pragmatist account of concepts and conceptual needs is the book's central philosophical achievement. Overall, I believe it is best to understand the book as applying a well-established, broadly Humean theory of normative authority to the question of which concepts we should retain, adopt, or abandon. It does not, however, establish a new source of normative authority or the existence of a fundamentally new kind of normative reason. My principal reservations therefore concern Queloz's claims about the novelty of his project rather than the richness of the account he develops. Ultimately, the concept-related authority question—and with it a substantial part of Queloz's "ethics of conceptualization"—depends heavily on how we answer an all-too-familiar metaethical question: whence normative authority? Despite the book's considerable merits, its reliance on familiar metaethical work could—and perhaps should—have been made clearer.

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[5]See, for example, pp. 32, 39, 43, 60, 114, 122, 195, 197, 199, 214, 216, 255, 268–69, and 376. For a complementary discussion of the metaethical assumptions underlying Queloz's project, see Köhler and Veluwenkamp (2025).

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