
1.

‘Meta-ethics’ usually characterises a second-level stance toward our moral opinions, which focuses on their meaning, epistemology, and ontological import. Current meta-ethical theorizing, however, does not merely analyse our moral claims in the vacuum. In fact, the richness and complexity of the practices that include moral utterances conform a paramount methodological constraint for Meta-ethics nowadays. Although current Meta-ethics still tries to answer the standard questions that concerned Moore a long time ago, its basic interest is the complex net of regularities and patterns of usage that surround our moral opinions (action-guidance, disagreement, justification, logical embeddings, etc). By accommodating such platitudes, Meta-ethics aims to offer a comprehensive account of the stance we occupy when we make a moral claim.

The image depicted above is well-established (Timmons 1999); however, it implies a problematic scenario. Under such image, two meta-ethical theories would offer opposite but equally plausible reconstructions of our moral stance. Here we would not be entitled to choose a meta-ethical theory with the feeling that our preferred choice offers a sound and undisputed story about the status of our moral opinions. Meta-ethics, in sum, would face a sort of impasse (Rosen 1998, Gibbard 2003, Dreier 2004).

Now, let us suppose that this is the state of current Meta-ethics. What should we do about this? How could we overcome the impasse? Terence Cuneo’s valuable book offers a possible answer to this general worry. In The Normative Web (TNW hereafter) he depicts a possible route for Meta-ethics “to pause and take stock” (Smith 2005, 6). His overall strategy is to use another normative domain—Epistemology—to obtain an additional base to cancel the alleged impasse. According to Cuneo, once we become aware of (i) the deep similarities underlying the ethical and epistemological domains of assessment and of (ii) the implausibility of endorsing any variety of irrealism about epistemic demands, a sound case would be made in support of moral realism. And this could help us to cancel the meta-ethical impasse.

Cuneo encapsulates his strategy by means of a single and carefully constructed argument. In the next section I will sketch this argument. Then I will focus on a problematic aspect of Cuneo’s criticism of epistemic irrealism. Finally, I will raise a general objection to Cuneo’s philosophical methodology. But let me start with the argument.

2.

Cuneo’s core argument for moral realism goes as follows (TNW, 6):

(1) If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist.
(2) Epistemic facts exist.
(3) So, moral facts exist.
(4) If moral facts exist, then moral realism is true.
(5) So, moral realism is true.

Premise 1 is central to Cuneo’s case for moral realism. He supports it by means of a two-stage strategy. In chapter 2—and after introducing in chapter 1 (ibid. 29ff.) the main features of what he denominates “moral realism of a paradigmatic sort”—Cuneo notes four similarities between moral and epistemic normative facts. These similarities are essential to support Cuneo’s modus tollens from (1) to (3).

According to Cuneo, while that Sam’s belief about UFO is irrational is a particular normative epistemic fact, that Sam’s treatment of Margaret is wrong stands for a particular normative moral fact. Both types of facts are similar in the following sense: they indicate categorical demands or reasons (ibid. 62),
they are structurally isomorphic in terms of their normative structure (ibid. 65, 70), they both sometimes favour identical responses - some moral facts demand beliefs from us, while some epistemic facts demand intentions (ibid. 74f.)—, and both are intimately entangled in many cases—making it impossible to separate epistemic and moral merit when assessing an agent’s beliefs or intentions (ibid. 76, 80).

It is important to note that all along his argument Cuneo refers to normative facts in a non-reductive sense (ibid. 29, 39). So when he says that Xs irreducibly exist, he is affirming that (a) there is a commonsensical conception of Xs, in which platitudes of various kinds concerning Xs are fundamental (he stresses the centrality of two platitudes, one about the content of moral and epistemic claims and another one about their authority—ibid. 36ff. and 58f.), and that (b) Xs exist if and only if they satisfy these platitudes, and that some entities satisfy such platitudes (ibid. 31). It is in this sense of irreducibility that moral and epistemic facts irreducibly exist. Hence, although Cuneo refers to himself as a moral realist, he is clearly not a naturalist moral realist (Railton 1986).

Now let us return to the argument. Once the similarities across domains noted above are in place, Cuneo moves to the second stage of his defence of premise 1. In chapter 3, he notes how the existence of moral facts has been customarily rejected by pointing out some features that such facts imply (their intrinsically motivating force, their inescapability or categoricity, their explanatory queerness, etc). Cuneo argues that it is because of these objectionable features that moral realism seems so implausible. So if moral facts do not exist because of these objectionable features, then nothing has the so-called objectionable features—because they make the existence of moral facts so objectionable. But if epistemic facts exist, then something has the objectionable features. From these two claims it follows that if moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist. And this is what premise 1 is claiming (TNW, 89f. and 227).

In support of premise 2, Cuneo attempts an indirect strategy that aims to debunk the attractive character of some prominent varieties of epistemic irrealism. By doing so he purports to establish the default plausibility of epistemic realism. In chapters 4 to 7, the author attacks a variety of meta-normative views that reject the existence of epistemic facts. He rejects epistemic nihilism (chapter 4), classic epistemic expressivism (chapter 5), sophisticated epistemic expressivism (chapter 6), and epistemic reductionism (chapter 7). The line of criticism attempted by Cuneo against these varieties of irrealism assumes that either they imply unacceptable skepticism, being self-defeating at the very end (error-theory), or that they do not fit very well with the way we speak about epistemic merit, i.e. with what we try to convey by calling something “justified”, “warranted”, “rational”, etc. (epistemic expressivism and reductionism). In essence, if Cuneo’s debunking is plausible then there is “at least a prima facie case that we ought to accept the core’s argument second premise, or the claim that epistemic claims exist” (ibid. 8). Premise 3 follows directly from premise 1 and 2. Normative moral facts exist because they form a genus along with a type of normative facts which existence we are disposed to assume.

This is Cuneo’s argument. Leaving aside its soundness for a moment, I would like to mention that a great deal of the originality and philosophical insight of this book resides on how Cuneo accommodates this argument into a wider framework in which two normative domains of assessment are connected in suggestive and sometimes unexpected ways (ibid. 73 and 79). At several points, Cuneo offers some suggestive examples of the intimate interconnection between moral and epistemic appraisal. Those who are inclined to endorse a virtue-based framework in Epistemology will find valuable discussions in many places (see, for instance, ibid. 74f.). Interestingly, Cuneo also suggests a possible explanation for the rationale supporting the mutual entanglement between our epistemic and moral assessments. According to him, the epistemic and moral facts to which moral and epistemic appraisals refer are interconnected because “both sort of facts are, as it were, grounded in features that comprise the human good” (ibid. 80). Because of that deep