

DISCUSSION

WHY CARE ABOUT MORAL FIXED POINTS?

DAVID KILLOREN

Northwestern University

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) argue for the following thesis:

that there is a range of moral propositions, the moral fixed points, which have these two distinguishing features: first, these propositions are constituted by nonnatural moral concepts, and second, these propositions are not identical with or made true exclusively by natural facts. Rather, they are true in virtue of the nature of the nonnatural moral concepts that constitute them. (403)

According to Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, this thesis entails the existence of “nonnatural moral truths” and thus establishes a version of nonnaturalist moral realism, albeit one that comes with fewer metaphysical commitments than other, more robust forms of moral realism. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are sympathetic to the robust realist thesis that there also exist “nonnatural moral properties and facts,” but they claim to remain officially neutral about that thesis.

The moral fixed points envisioned by Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are substantive moral propositions. For instance, one of the fixed points is the proposition that it is (pro tanto) wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person. According to Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, to deny this proposition is to betray some form of conceptual deficiency. If they are right, then their argument performs a neat trick: it shows that opponents of (a certain minimal version of) nonnaturalist moral realism are not only mistaken, but are deficient at the conceptual level.

In this paper, I'll discuss some of the criticisms that others have given, and then I'll offer two new criticisms of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's view. My first criticism is minor: I don't think that their view counts as a genuine form of moral nonnaturalism. My second criticism is more significant: I'll argue that their view drains morality of its normative significance and therefore implies that we should not care about morality.

1. Two Previous Criticisms

Stephen Ingram (2015) takes issue with Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's position that their opponents are conceptually deficient. Ingram's discussion focuses on error theorists. Error theorists agree with moral realists such as Cuneo and Shafer-Landau that moral discourse involves a commitment to stance-independent moral truths; but error theorists doubt that any such truths exist, and so they maintain that moral discourse is in systematic error. Many of us are convinced that error theorists are *mistaken*, but it's another matter to accuse them of *conceptual deficiency*—especially given that some highly trained moral philosophers, who are deeply immersed in the study of moral concepts, endorse an error theory. Ingram argues that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau fail to demonstrate that a conceptual deficiency necessarily accompanies endorsement of an error theory. Therefore, Ingram is skeptical of the view that the moral fixed points count as conceptual truths.

To make his case, Ingram argues that error theorists arrive at their view through methods of philosophical reasoning that are widely used and that bear no clear indication of conceptual deficiency. But Ingram does not attack the heart of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's argument. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau offer four main reasons to think that the moral fixed points are conceptually necessary: (i) if they are true, they are necessarily true; (ii) they enjoy "framework status," i.e., they set the boundaries of what counts as acceptable or genuine moral discourse; (iii) to deny them evokes bewilderment; and (iv) they are knowable *a priori* (407–8). These four features, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau maintain, are "marks" of a conceptual truth—they provide evidence (though perhaps defeasible evidence) that the fixed points are conceptual truths. The evidence is abductive: If the fixed points are conceptual truths, then this would explain why they bear these four marks. Ingram does not dispute that the fixed points bear these four marks, and does not offer any alternative explanation of *why* they bear these marks. Until an alternative explanation is offered, I think Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's position remains undefeated by Ingram's objection.

A related line of criticism has been presented by Evers and Streumer (forthcoming). To make their argument, they present an analogy with conceptual truths about God.

A Christian might claim that the proposition expressed by "Benevolence is rewarded by God" is a conceptual truth. And there is some basis for that claim: someone might think that God is, by conceptual necessity, perfectly good and omnipotent, and that the concepts of perfect goodness and omnipotence are such that any being bearing those traits would reward benevolence.

Nevertheless, "Benevolence is rewarded by God" does not express a conceptual truth, and we can see this through the following

argument: (i) “Benevolence is rewarded by God” entails God’s existence; so, (ii) if “Benevolence is rewarded by God” expresses a conceptual truth, then God exists by conceptual necessity; but (iii) God does not exist by conceptual necessity; therefore, (iv) “Benevolence is rewarded by God” does not express a conceptual truth. The only conceptual truth in the neighborhood, according to Evers and Streumer, is that *if anything is rewarded by God, benevolence is rewarded by God*.

For parallel reasons, Evers and Streumer doubt that a sentence like “It is (pro tanto) wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person” expresses a conceptual truth, but they allow that a conceptual truth might be expressed by a weaker sentence, e.g., “*If anything is (pro tanto) wrong, it is (pro tanto) wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person.*” But of course, this type of merely conditional statement does not give Cuneo and Shafer-Landau the sort of moral fixed points that they require in order to establish their preferred kind of nonnaturalist realism.

Thus, a dilemma: If Cuneo and Shafer-Landau allow that “Benevolence is rewarded by God” is a conceptual truth, then they must also say that God’s existence is a conceptual truth, which seems quite false (if we’re not Anselmians); but if Cuneo and Shafer-Landau say that “Benevolence is rewarded by God” is *not* a conceptual truth, then they will have to explain why such substantive theological claims are to be denied the status of conceptual truths while various substantive moral claims, such as the moral fixed points, are to be granted that privileged status. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau will need to respond to this dilemma.

In sum, the argument given by Ingram, and the related argument given by Evers and Streumer, raise significant problems that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau will need to address, but I think neither of these lines of criticism is decisive. In what follows, I’ll offer a different kind of argument that I believe will significantly strengthen the case against Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s view.

2. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s Non-Nonnaturalism

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau think that their view about moral fixed points establishes that there are nonnatural moral truths, “where a nonnatural moral truth is a true moral proposition that is not identical with or made true exclusively by some natural fact” (401). The problem, I’ll argue, is that they turn out to be committed to the view that the moral fixed points *are* made true exclusively by natural facts. Specifically, they are made true by natural facts about concepts. Consequently, the moral fixed points do not count as *nonnatural* moral truths.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau do not offer a definition of “natural.” Instead, they choose to defer to widely accepted judgments about

what is and is not natural. They suggest that they will take as natural

entities that most parties to these debates would agree are natural, say, because these entities are empirically knowable, or play an explanatory role in the usual sciences (or are wholly constructible from or reducible to entities that play such an explanatory role). (402)

They give a few examples of putatively natural entities: "(i) objects such as protons and light waves, (ii) properties such as *being green* and *being in pain*, and (iii) concepts such as 'negative charge' and 'being angry.'" They also give examples of "live candidates" for being non-natural entities: "(i) objects such as God or practical reasons, (ii) properties such as *being morally wrong* and *being unreasonable*, and (iii) concepts such as 'being intrinsically valuable' and 'being sublime.'"

I want to dispute their claim that concepts like 'being intrinsically valuable' are nonnatural entities. In fact, I want to argue that *all* concepts are a part of the natural world. To make my argument, I'll first consider Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's account of concepts.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau accept what they call "the traditional view" of concepts (409–10). According to that view, concepts have three defining characteristics. (i) Concepts are not "ideas in the head, sentences in the brain, or anything of that sort," but are instead "abstract, sharable, mind-independent ways of thinking about objects and their properties," and thus "are very much objective, 'out there' sorts of things, extra-mental items whose existence does not depend on our employing them in thought or language." (ii) Concepts are "building blocks or sub-components of propositions." (iii) Concepts are "*referential devices* or *ways of getting things in mind* that enable thinkers to refer to things such as objects and properties." A given concept might not successfully apply to anything (e.g., there are no unicorns although there is a concept of unicorn), but "their function is such that they purport to apply" to objects and properties.

I submit that there is nothing in naturalism that is inconsistent with the existence of concepts of the sort just described. The naturalist worldview is fully consistent with the existence of abstract, shareable referential devices that serve as ways of getting things in mind and form the building blocks of propositions. Of course, not *all* naturalists will accept the existence of these sorts of abstract entities. A naturalist can hold that everything whatsoever that exists is concrete. But naturalists surely do not *have* to endorse that kind of extreme nominalism.

Indeed, the existence of abstract entities such as concepts can be supported empirically. Translation furnishes just one example of this. If you ask a competent translator to translate the English word "God" into French, the answer will almost always be "Dieu." To explain this

predictable and observable regularity, we can suppose that “God” and “Dieu” invoke the same concept, and that English-French translators make use of such concepts in order to perform their translations. This provides empirically grounded abductive support for the existence of concepts. There is nothing about this kind of abductive inference that goes beyond the boundaries of naturalism as conventionally understood; these sorts of empirically grounded abductive inferences are a routine part of any natural science. And so the fact that God (if he exists) is not a natural being is fully compatible with the supposition that the *concept* of God is very much a part of the natural world.

Therefore, I maintain, concepts—even concepts of nonnatural beings—are plausibly regarded as a part of the natural world. Further, as we’ve seen, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau hold that the moral fixed points are made true exclusively by various concepts. And, as we’ve already seen, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau also stipulate that a nonnatural moral truth is “a true moral proposition that is not identical with *or made true exclusively* by some natural fact” (emphasis added). From this, it follows that the moral fixed points are not nonnatural moral truths. And so, even if Cuneo and Shafer-Landau succeed in demonstrating that their moral fixed points are conceptually necessary, they do not thereby succeed in demonstrating the existence of nonnatural moral truths; therefore, their official view is not a genuine form of moral nonnaturalism.

3. Why Should We Care About Morality?

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau write:

Suppose, for argument’s sake, that the picture we’ve sketched is more or less correct, and that the moral fixed points set the boundaries of [what can count as a genuine] moral system. Still, one might wonder: Why should we care about morality? Why think that we have reason to pledge allegiance to *this* normative system, rather than another—call it *schmorality*—that fails to incorporate (perhaps some central cases of) the moral fixed points? (406–7)

They ask this question in order to set it aside, claiming that an adequate answer would require an essay unto itself. Fair enough. But it’s one thing if their account simply does not address the “Why care about morality?” question. It’s another thing entirely if, as I’ll argue, their account rules out the possibility that we should care about morality.

Consider a case in which a person is trying to decide whether to engage in recreational slaughter of a fellow person. You tell him not to proceed, and he asks you to give him a reason why. Suppose you say:

(1) Recreational slaughter of a fellow person is (pro tanto) wrong.

And suppose he responds: “But why should I believe that that is so?” If you are on board with Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, you’ll think that the following is a correct answer:

(2) The concepts *recreational*, *slaughter*, *person*, *wrong*, etc., are such that *recreational slaughter of a fellow person* necessarily falls under the concept *wrong*.

Perhaps (1) gives a reason to refrain from recreational slaughter; I’ll address that in a moment. But, first, I want to argue for a different claim: that the response given in (2) does not, on its own, offer any reason to refrain from recreation slaughter. More generally, mere facts about the relations between different concepts rarely, if ever, provide reasons to do or not to do anything. If we have reasons at all in a given case, those reasons are provided, not by concepts, but by other sorts of entities—properties, facts, states of affairs, individuals, causal connections, counterfactual dependencies, and so on.

To support this point, consider a different example. Suppose your friend Tim is a bachelor. This fact about Tim (in conjunction with other facts) seems to give reasons to treat him in certain ways. For instance, perhaps Tim’s being a bachelor (in conjunction with other facts) gives you a reason to offer him a studio apartment rather than a house. But this reason is not provided by the fact that Tim (given his marital status, gender, etc.) happens to fall under a certain concept. Likewise, while it seems clear that we have reasons to avoid performing wrong actions such as recreational slaughter of innocent people, the relation between those actions and a certain concept does not seem to be among those reasons.

Above I considered two propositions:

(1) Recreational slaughter of a fellow person is (pro tanto) wrong,

and

(2) The concepts *recreational*, *slaughter*, *person*, *wrong*, etc., are such that *recreational slaughter of a fellow person* necessarily falls under the concept *wrong*.

I’ve just argued that (2) provides little in the way of a reason to refrain from recreational slaughter. And so, if (1) is going to be reasons-providing, then we had better be able to distinguish (1) from (2).

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s view is that propositions such as (1) are true *in virtue of* the truth of propositions such as (2). That view, as I’ve just stated it, is compatible with the possibility that (1) and (2)

are really just the same proposition, but this would be problematic as I've explained. So let's work with an alternate interpretation (which I think is the more plausible interpretation anyway): Let's suppose that, on their view, (2) and (1) are distinct propositions, but in a way that allows (1) to be true in virtue of (2).

However, this alternative interpretation still casts doubt on whether morality is reasons-giving. After all, the *source* of morality, if it has a source, is generally considered to be relevant to the question of the relation between morality and reasons. To illustrate this, consider a much-maligned view: cultural relativism. The cultural relativist will typically agree that (1) is true (at least "for us," i.e., for those in our society), but she will locate the source of this truth in a proposition such as

(3) Our society is such that recreational slaughter of a fellow person is condemned by our society's generally accepted moral standards.

Cultural relativism, thus described, faces a well-known problem: it locates the source of morality in a normatively irrelevant set of facts. That is, the mere fact that our society happens to generally accept a standard that forbids a given action does not seem, on its own, to provide any reason to refrain from performing that action. And this, in turn, seems to undermine the normative significance of the moral truths that cultural relativism seeks to explain.

The criticism of cultural relativism that I've just summarized might be presented as follows:

The Argument from Irrelevancy Transmission

- I. (3) is normatively irrelevant (i.e., fails to be reasons-providing).
- II. According to the cultural relativist, (1) obtains in virtue of (3).
- III. Principle of Irrelevancy Transmission: If X is normatively irrelevant, and Y obtains in virtue of X, then Y is normatively irrelevant.
- IV. Therefore, if the cultural relativist is correct, then (1) is normatively irrelevant.

As this argument shows, it can be risky to identify a source of morality. The risk is that the source one identifies might turn out to be normatively irrelevant, which in turn would render morality itself normatively irrelevant. Perhaps this is why a number of moral realists, such as Erik Wielenberg (2014, pp. 36–8), claim that at least some moral truths are utterly sourceless. Indeed, it is arguable that morality cannot have a source (Heathwood 2012). But Cuneo and Shafer-Landau do not take that view. They identify a source of morality in moral concepts. This means that the Principle of Irrelevancy Transmission can go to work on their view.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau hold that (1) obtains in virtue of (2), but (2) is (as I argued earlier) normatively irrelevant; so, by the Principle of Irrelevancy Transmission, it follows that (1) is normatively irrelevant. This is bad news if Cuneo and Shafer-Landau want to maintain that the wrongness of recreational slaughter provides a reason against engaging in recreational slaughter.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau have a way to avoid this problem, although they do not take it. They could say that (2) merely provides *evidence* of (1). Stated in general terms, the view would be that, by investigating our moral concepts, we can find evidence of the truth of various moral propositions, although those moral propositions are not true *in virtue of* the concepts.

If we take this alternative route, then a question arises: What precisely is the proposition that (2) is evidence of? Here I suggest we should consider two different propositions:

(4) Recreational slaughter has whatever property is picked out by the concept *wrong*,

and

(5) Recreational slaughter has whatever property is normatively relevant (in the way that wrongness is customarily thought to be normatively relevant).

Obviously, (2) provides excellent evidence of (4), but that is trivial. The really interesting question is whether (2) provides any evidence of (5). And it seems to me that (2) *would* provide evidence of (5) *if* we had antecedent reason to believe that our moral concepts are appropriately related to a property that is genuinely normatively relevant. Do we have such an antecedent reason? Perhaps. But this is a question that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau do not try to answer.

In response to these issues, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau could accept the Principle of Irrelevancy Transmission, and therefore accept that the wrongness of recreational slaughter provides no reason against it. But they could say that wrongness nevertheless *tracks* reasons. For instance, they could say that the painfulness of recreational slaughter provides a reason against it; and the property of wrongness is strongly correlated with the property of painfulness; and so, whenever an action is wrong, this apprises us of the existence of a reason against that action, even though the property of wrongness itself does not provide such a reason. In other words, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau could retreat to a kind of *buck-passing account* of the relation between reasons and moral properties like wrongness.

I have two things to say about this buck-passing strategy. First, even if this strategy works, the above considerations still reveal something interesting about Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's account: specifically,

they reveal that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's account is in tension with the idea that moral properties themselves are reasons-providing, and seems to require some version of the buck-passing view. And of course this result will mean that anyone who wants to resist the buck-passing view should want to resist Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's view.

Second, it bears notice that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau do not offer an argument for the buck-passing view discussed above (or even consider it), and so it is difficult at this stage to assess its compatibility with the version of minimal realism that they are developing. Further, the buck-passing account is probably not verifiable through the sort of conceptual investigation that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau want to use to establish their view.

4. Conclusion

I have discussed four lines of criticism of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's view: (i) Ingram's argument that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are mistaken in their implication that error theorists are conceptually deficient; (ii) Evers and Streumer's argument that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's moral fixed points need to be conditionalized in a way that makes them useless for defense of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's brand of realism; (iii) my argument that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's view does not count as a genuine form of moral nonnaturalism; and (iv) my argument that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's view implies that moral properties are not reasons-providing. In my opinion, none of these arguments are decisive; it is possible to imagine responses to each of them. However, I think each of these arguments goes *some* distance toward weakening Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's view, and these four arguments combined might be sufficient to justify rejection of their view.

References

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