



DISCUSSION NOTE

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The Moral Fixed Points: Reply to Cuneo and Shafer-Landau

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ACCORDING TO TERENCE CUNEO and Russ Shafer-Landau, moral nonnaturalists should accept that certain substantive moral propositions are conceptual truths.¹ They call these the “moral fixed points,” and offer examples like the following:

- It is *pro tanto* wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person.
- There is some moral reason to offer aid to those in distress, if such aid is very easily given and comes at very little expense.
- If acting justly is costless, then, *ceteris paribus*, one should act justly.

I am sympathetic to moral nonnaturalism, but I am skeptical about the direction in which Cuneo and Shafer-Landau want to take it. We have reason to deny that those who reject the so-called moral fixed points are conceptually deficient, and this undermines the proposal that these moral propositions are conceptual truths.

1. The Proposal

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (411-12) offer the following proposal:

There are nonnatural moral truths. These truths include the moral fixed points, which are a species of conceptual truth, as they are propositions that are true in virtue of the essences of their constituent concepts.

This is designed to be compatible with any construal of the natural/nonnatural distinction. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (401-02) prefer a metaphysical construal, on which moral properties and facts are *sui generis*.

The provocative claim is that some nonnatural moral truths are conceptual truths. Conceptual truths are glossed as propositions that are true in virtue of the essences of their constituent concepts. It is of the essence of the concept “being human,” for example, that it applies to exactly those things that are human. On this view, a proposition [that *x* is *F*] is a conceptual truth if it belongs to the essence of “*F*” that, necessarily, anything that satisfies “*x*” also satisfies “*F*.” In the moral case, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (410) suggest that the moral proposition [that recreational slaughter of a fellow person is wrong] is a conceptual truth in case it belongs to the essence of the concept “being wrong” that, necessarily, if anything satisfies the concept “recreational slaughter of a fellow person,”

¹ T. Cuneo and R. Shafer-Landau (2014) “The Moral Fixed Points: New Directions for Moral Nonnaturalism,” *Philosophical Studies* 171(3): 399-443. All page references are to this text.

it also satisfies the concept “being wrong.”² Cuneo and Shafer-Landau think that this proposal helps answer criticisms of nonnaturalism.³ However, I am skeptical about there being substantive moral propositions that are conceptual truths.

2. Conceptual Deficiencies

If a proposition is a conceptual truth, anyone who rejects it is conceptually deficient in some way. They fail to possess the relevant concepts, or they possess them but fail to understand them, or they possess and understand them but fail to appreciate their implications. To accept Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s proposal is thus to charge those who reject the moral fixed points with conceptual deficiency. However, it is not obvious that those who actually reject the moral fixed points are conceptually deficient. Error theorists, for example, reject the moral fixed points. Are they conceptually deficient?

First, what is error theory? The error theorist agrees with the nonnaturalist about the nature of moral discourse, accepting that our use of moral terms involves a nonnegotiable commitment to nonnatural moral properties and facts. However, error theorists disagree with nonnaturalists about metaphysics. They reject nonnatural moral properties and facts, and thus say that moral discourse is in systematic error. The error theorist will thus reject any suggested moral fixed point, saying that it commits us to an unacceptable ontology. Now, if we have reason to deny that error theorists are conceptually deficient, we have reason to deny that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths. So, the key question is this: Are error theorists conceptually deficient in their rejection of the moral fixed points?

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (412-15, 438-39) are sensitive to a version of this worry, acknowledging that their proposal may appear uncharitable to the error theorist. They respond as follows:

Nonnaturalists hold that the degree to which the moral fixed points are evident is quite high. ... But nonnaturalists do not maintain that the moral fixed points are maximally evident. ... It is possible to wonder, for example, whether one has failed to appreciate the force of various antirealist arguments. ... It is also possible to wonder whether there is something deeply defective about our moral concepts, which we have not yet appreciated, which would render them incapable of referring to moral properties if any were to exist (414).

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are committed to the accusation of conceptual deficiency, but they allow that error theorists (and their arguments) can and should be taken seriously. They are thus not uncharitable. This response seems a respectable answer to the “lack of charity” objection, but the matter does not end there. We do not just want to know whether it is

² Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (408-10) do not identify conceptual truths with analytic truths. They see analytic truths as formal and vacuous, but allow that conceptual truths (including the moral fixed points) can be substantive.

³ They think that it helps answer objections concerning moral disagreement, evolutionary debunking and moral supervenience.

uncharitable to accuse the error theorist of conceptual deficiency. We want to know whether the error theorist is actually conceptually deficient. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau do not, as far as I can see, address this more fundamental problem.

We are dealing with different points here: To ask whether one can accuse error theorists of conceptual deficiency while taking their views seriously is one thing, but to ask whether error theorists are actually conceptually deficient is another. Even if Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are not being uncharitable, it is possible to deny that error theorists are conceptually deficient (and thus that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths). After all, nonnaturalists cannot charge error theorists with failure to possess or understand moral concepts – both parties agree about the nature of moral discourse. Their disagreement is metaphysical rather than conceptual. So the accusation must be that error theorists fail to appreciate what their moral concepts imply. However, it is not enough to simply accuse error theorists of failing to appreciate what their concepts imply. One has to make the case for this accusation, otherwise it is just ad hoc. If the charge of conceptual deficiency remains unsubstantiated, we are entitled to deny that error theorists are conceptually deficient in their rejection of the moral fixed points. And this would entitle us to deny that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths.

How, then, might one make a case for thinking that error theorists fail to appreciate the implications of their moral concepts? One suggestion that we might draw from Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's discussion is that error theorists are misled by sophisticated (but unsound) arguments. It is a mistake, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau say, to reject highly evident ethical propositions (like the moral fixed points) by appeal to highly controversial metaethical claims (like the claim that moral properties and facts are queer, or that moral beliefs can be debunked). Cuneo and Shafer-Landau diagnose error theorists as falling foul of this "suspect philosophical methodology" (438). What exactly they are getting at here is not clear, but they seem to be gesturing at the following line of thought. In philosophical inquiry, good practice involves seeking to accommodate our intuitions about our chosen topic by developing theories that vindicate these intuitions. The error theorist fails to follow good philosophical practice, for their theory repudiates our strongest intuitions by rejecting the moral fixed points.

In other words, it is suggested that we can provide indirect support to the charge of conceptual deficiency by pointing to a questionable methodology. The error theorist misses the implications of their concepts as a result of a distorting process of philosophical reasoning, one that gives too much weight to contentious metaethical claims, and too little to first-order moral intuitions. The conceptual deficiency charge is thus not an ad hoc maneuver designed to save the proposal that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths, for the charge is supported indirectly by a methodological diagnosis of the error theorist's situation. However, if this is what Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are getting at, it is not compelling.

First off, note that the methodology of which Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are suspicious is widely employed in philosophy. Claims that

seem intuitively plausible are often given up in light of deeper reflection and more considered argument. To give some examples, it is intuitively very plausible that time is real, that scientific investigation delivers true theories of reality, that human beings have free will and that moral agents have reasonably stable character traits. Yet, these claims are subject to apparently legitimate debate, and there are philosophers who reject them by appealing to controversial philosophical arguments. If this methodology is suspect when used by error theorists, then it is presumably suspect when used by any philosopher. Perhaps it is indeed a bad methodology wherever it is applied, but we should recognize that a wide range of fields in philosophy would be radically altered if philosophers were directed only to construct theories that accommodate our intuitions.

More importantly, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are wrong to suggest that error theorists operate with a bad methodology. Consider a rough guide to philosophical inquiry. *Step one*: Identify your intuitions and make them consistent. *Step two*: Develop a theory that can vindicate these considered intuitions. Test this theory by standard criteria for theory selection. If it passes, accept the theory. If it fails, move to step three. *Step three*: Revise your theory. If the theory remains problematic, move to step four. *Step four*: Acknowledge that the intuitions with which you started are in error. Explain why this so.

We can understand error theorists as having undergone this process. Most people are likely to find that their moral intuitions, including the moral fixed points, are highly evident. So most error theorists start at step one by attempting to get their moral intuitions in order. They then proceed to step two, and find that nonnaturalism is the most compelling way to vindicate their moral intuitions. However, in testing this theory, error theorists judge it unacceptable. (Perhaps they find nonnatural properties and facts intolerably mysterious.) They thus move to step three, perhaps attempting to naturalize moral properties and facts. But they find that this theory fails to vindicate their moral intuitions. Despite their best efforts, they cannot find a theory that succeeds both in vindicating their moral intuitions and in being ontologically respectable. So, they move to step four. They acknowledge and explain the errors in those moral intuitions that seem highly evident. In short, they arrive at error theory.

We can debate whether error theorists are correct. The nonnaturalist may say that the error theorist makes a mistake at step two in thinking nonnaturalism mysterious. Alternatively, one might suggest that the error theorist makes a mistake at step three. This is what expressivists and moral naturalists will say. Either way, there is nothing wrong with the error theorist's *methodology*. Indeed, it seems that they have proceeded entirely legitimately along our (admittedly rough) four-step program. Importantly, this removes the suggested support for the conceptual deficiency charge. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau lose their justification for saying that error theorists are conceptually deficient in rejecting the moral fixed points. This charge is unsubstantiated and ad hoc, so entirely deniable.

3. Conclusion

If the charge that error theorists are conceptually deficient in their rejection of the moral fixed points is deniable, so is the claim that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths. Despite being sympathetic to nonnaturalism, I am therefore skeptical of the direction in which Cuneo and Shafer-Landau want to take it.⁴

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