Book Review

The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism, by Terence
Cuneo. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 260. H/b £40.

The Normative Web is an important book, if for no other reason than it does
something that is unfortunately all too rare in contemporary metaethics: it
presents a very promising argument in favour of moral realism. The core
argument is easy to state: (i) if moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts
do not exist; (ii) epistemic facts exist; (iii) so, moral facts exist; (iv) if moral
facts exist, then moral realism is true; and (v) so, moral realism is true (p. 6).
Terence Cuneo takes advantage of the simplicity of this argument when it
comes to providing an elegant structure for his book, as he carefully defends
each premiss of the argument against a wide range of possible objections. The
simplicity of the core argument belies a degree of complexity and sophisti-
cation in the finer details of the author's arguments that only appear as he
spins his web out in many directions, snaring many different real and imag-
inary opponents as he does so.

A large part of the book is dedicated to a discussion of anti-realist alter-
natives, especially expressivism. Other reviewers might focus on the excel-
lent, interesting arguments against expressivism, where the author takes
considerable care when describing his opponents' views — dividing them
naturally across two chapters into 'traditional' or truth-dismissive, and
'non-traditional' or truth-friendly accounts (although it should be noted
that, unlike many of his actual expressivist opponents, Cuneo is primarily
interested in expressivism in relation to *epistemic* discourse, rather than in
relation to moral discourse, since such expressivism constitutes a serious
threat to the second premiss of the core argument). The focus in this
review will instead be on weak spots in the author's core argument that
might be thought to remain once we have rejected expressivism as an
approach to understanding normative discourse, in favour of cognitivism.

Cognitivism is one of three elements that Terence Cuneo takes to be essen-
tial to 'paradigmatic' moral realism (he takes cognitivism to be equivalent to
the speech act thesis that at least some moral discourse is assertoric, p. 21).
The other two elements are the 'alethic' thesis that some predicative moral
claims are true and the 'ontic' thesis that there are 'irreducible' moral facts.
Epistemic realism, as Cuneo understands it, is also committed to epistemic
versions of these three theses. The inclusion of the ontic thesis in both cases

makes it clear that Cuneo is interested in a strong form of realism throughout; a weaker realism might come from accepting only the speech act and alethic theses.

Given much of what he says, one might think Cuneo would be happy to accept only the first two theses as long as a proviso were added to the second thesis that *truth* be understood to be a robust property (he attacks deflationary accounts of truth when he turns to expressivism). However, Cuneo takes it as crucial to the ontic thesis that normative facts are 'irreducible' to other facts (p. 29), and this might seem to suggest that the ontic thesis is a particularly strong, independent thesis.

In fact, when Cuneo defines 'reducibility', he does so in a manner that requires a reductionist to actually *reject* some central platitudes about the entities that are being explained (away) in any purported reduction (pp. 29–30). This is a controversial way of defining 'reducibility', for it implies that someone who says conscious states really exist, *and* that they are identical to physical states describable in non-mental terms, is not necessarily a reductionist (assuming that they do not reject any of the central platitudes). The ontic thesis that Cuneo takes to be the third essential component of paradigmatic moral realism is not really as strong as it might initially seem to be, since many naturalists might actually accept that there are irreducible moral facts according to his definition of 'irreducible'; he apparently does not mean to rule out naturalism per se, but is just unsure what it amounts to (p. 220).

In any case, central to the commonsense platitudes that are said to lie at the heart of substantive moral realism are platitudes that concern the *content* of morality, and platitudes that concern the *authority* of morality. The first set conceptual limits on the suitability of moral predicates (p. 36). The second tell us that certain features of the world are *prescriptive* in so far as their presence implies or indicates that people have normative reasons to behave in one way or another, and that some such reasons are *inescapable*, since they are not dependent on any particular desires or conventions (pp. 37–9). An essential part of Cuneo's defence of the first premiss of the core argument ('If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist') is the claim that closely analogous commonsense platitudes apply when we consider the epistemic realm (pp. 56–9). In particular, it is essential that we should be committed to thinking that certain features of the world provide, imply, or indicate that we have epistemic normative reasons, and that we view such reasons as being inescapable ('epistemic facts are, imply, or indicate categorical reasons for agents to behave in certain ways', p. 59). If we are not so committed, then the main reasons we have for doubting the existence of moral facts will not be reasons for doubting the existence of epistemic facts.

I think it is at this point that Cuneo underplays the attractiveness to some of the position that, while there are facts about whether certain mental states count as well-justified beliefs, warranted beliefs, knowledge, understanding,

etc., there are no inescapable epistemic *normative* facts (i.e. that there is nothing I have categorical reasons to believe, or inescapably ought to believe). There may be rational requirements on belief formation, but one might think that such requirements are not normative. John Broome, for instance, has argued that rational requirements *might* lack any essential normativity, just as requirements of etiquette clearly lack essential normativity (see John Broome, 'Is Rationality Normative?', *Disputatio*, 11, 2008, pp. 153–71). One might think that one can avoid extreme sceptical conclusions by still accepting that genuine epistemic judgements can be made concerning justification, warrant, and knowledge. It certainly does not seem to follow merely from the fact that a state that I could bring myself into would be a state of knowledge that I have a normative reason to bring myself into that state (let alone that, in some such cases, I *ought* to bring myself into the relevant state).

However, in order to be fair to Cuneo, I should emphasize that his strategy is to first make a case for some fairly *loose* conceptual necessity claims — such as that if an epistemic state has the characteristic of being warranted then it is (*or* implies *or* indicates that there is) a categorical reason to adopt it, and if it has the characteristic of being unwarranted then it is (*or* implies *or* indicates that there is) a categorical reason not to adopt it — and, only then, secondly, to argue that we do indeed have categorical reasons to believe things (see, especially, Ch. 7, 'Epistemic Reductionism', where he argues against a number of alternatives, such as Kornblith's project in naturalized epistemology, which would have it that epistemic reasons are all hypothetical, yet universal in scope). My point here is simply that the relevant conceptual claims — the authority platitudes — may be less commonly agreed upon than the author thinks they are (For Kornblith's view see, for example, Hilary Kornblith, 'Epistemic Normativity', *Synthese*, 94, 1993, pp. 357–76.).

In one of the most interesting sections of his book, Cuneo provides reasons for thinking the epistemic and moral domains are, in essence, deeply interconnected (pp. 71–80): first, a wide range of responses on the part of agents are well suited to both moral and epistemic assessment (Cuneo rejects the idea that epistemic reasons primarily govern beliefs, whereas moral reasons primarily govern action); and secondly, some important virtues demonstrate commitment to *hybrid* norms that are neither purely epistemic nor purely moral (e.g. norms of honesty, humility, trust, and fairness in evaluating the views of others). If the moral and epistemic domains are as interconnected as Cuneo here suggests they are, then it might prove very difficult to deny that there are categorical epistemic reasons (or epistemic normative facts), while one at the same time claims that there are categorical moral reasons (or moral normative facts). Although this section of the book is tantalizing, I think it would have been helpful to have more detailed arguments presented for the claims made here, given that they might well be taken to be an essential bulwark against opposition from those who would admit the existence of certain epistemic facts (concerning justification, knowledge, etc.), yet deny

the existence of normative epistemic facts, and given that this opposition poses a threat to the first premiss of the core argument.

I think we should agree with the author that there is something very attractive about the idea that the normative realm is *unitary*, in some deep sense (this thought is the basis of a recent trend; see, most notably, Ralph Wedgwood's *The Nature of Normativity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). We use words like 'reason', and 'ought' across moral and epistemic cases, and we generally suspect no ambiguity or equivocation when doing so (putting the obviously non-normative uses of such words to one side). If the normative is one, then we might expect claims about the categoricity of practical and epistemic reasons to ultimately rise or fall together, that is, we might expect that reasons of the practical and epistemic kinds are either both categorical, or both hypothetical. This seems to provide a large part of the motive for accepting the first premiss of the core argument, and for rejecting the option of thinking of epistemic reasons as merely hypothetical; for, on the assumption that the normative is one, this option would seem to lead to the unattractive conclusion that *all* reasons are merely hypothetical.

However, the author overlooks the possibility that what ultimately explains and grounds the categoricity of epistemic reasons (when they are categorical) is the categoricity of practical reasons — the categoricity of the first might be inherited from the categoricity of the second. Perhaps I ought to believe that there is a world outside my window *because* I ought to wander outside and smell the roses. At a more general level, perhaps I have categorical reasons to possess knowledge *because* the possession of knowledge is required by categorical reasons grounded in the practical benefits that will flow to myself and others if I possess such knowledge. This is an important omission not just because it is a plausible, alternative way of construing the normative as one, but, more importantly, because putting this option on the table shows how the dialectic of the core argument is susceptible to a strong challenge. A certain type of error theorist (i.e. one type of truth-denying cognitivist, or 'nihilist', to use Cuneo's preferred term) might well take the above explanatory claim to be accurate when it comes to describing our fundamental commitments regarding the normative domain, yet contend that actually there are no practical categorical reasons, and that, therefore, the core argument is question-begging. The conclusion that the core argument is question-begging would follow at this point since the error theorist that we are imagining accepts the at least somewhat plausible idea that epistemic normative facts, if there are any, are all to be explained by practical normative facts; hence, an appeal to the existence of epistemic normative facts in an argument intended to establish the existence of practical normative facts (specifically, *moral* facts, as the reader will recall) could have no independent role to play.

It is admittedly a little unclear to what extent I have succeeded in discovering a problem in Cuneo's general approach here, since he at one point admits

that there are no non-question-begging arguments that can be used against certain views, such as the view that there are no epistemic reasons (pp. 120–1), and this suggests he might not be too concerned that his master argument is question-begging relative to the opponent I have just sketched. However, I am tempted to think that *if* a thoroughgoing error theory about normativity is at all plausible, then the particular argument for error theory that I just sketched has a great deal going for it (I admit that this is a big 'if', and it so happens I am not myself attracted to either the antecedent or the consequent).

Cuneo presents substantive arguments against epistemic nihilism in one chapter of his book (Ch. 4), so I do not mean to suggest he has nothing to say that would be useful in a debate with the kind of error theorist I am imagining. Amongst other things, I think he would want to say that the relevant position cannot be coherently defended, for the error theorist who attempted to defend it would appear to be in the business of telling us we have reasons to believe that we do not have reasons to believe anything. None the less, the fundamental cognitivist dialectic might end up appearing quite different than the core argument seems to suggest: any cognitivist (whether error theorist or realist) who believes that the structure of normativity as it appears to us on a fundamental level — perhaps at the level of the platitudes Cuneo himself relies on — is such that epistemic normativity derives all of its reality from practical normativity will not find the core argument either persuasive or useful. And this judgement about lack of persuasiveness and utility in the core argument may be shared by the different kind of opponent I discussed above, who is happy to admit that there are practical normative facts (i.e. categorical reasons for action), and that there are epistemic facts, yet thinks that she has good grounds for denying that such epistemic facts are ever essentially *normative* (or, in other words, that epistemic reasons are ever categorical). None the less, even these opponents will still find many parts of this excellent book very helpful for the way that they advance our understanding of the philosophical landscape.

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