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 plattitudes, 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 idealism. 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
commonality around human good, moral and epistemic facts are authoritative in a similar way (ibid. 36, 59).

3.

As I noted above, a basic step in Cuneo’s argument—premise 2—rests on a sustained criticism of a variety of irrealism traditionally labelled as expressivism. This is one of the most controversial moves in Cuneo’s book and it deserves some attention. Let me start by noting how he understands the current divide among expressivists and how he applies it to the epistemological domain.

According to Cuneo, we can differentiate between traditional and non-traditional expressivism (ibid. 125). Traditional expressivism defends that utterances involving normative epistemic terms do not perform an assertoric speech-act, and they do not convey an epistemic proposition. Instead, by uttering sentences involving normative epistemic terms the speaker expresses a practical-orientated, desire-like, psychological state. Non-traditional expressivism, on the contrary, defends that although epistemic discourse functions as an expressive device aimed at coordinating a community of agents, such discourse can still be understood as truth-apt and representative (ibid. 147ff.). Both versions of expressivism are committed to a guiding rationale, according to Cuneo. In terms of it, when we offer an expressivist reconstruction of the nature and function of our epistemic discourse we have to avoid an error-theoretic account of such discourse, saving at the same time the appearances of the target discourse (ibid. 128ff.).

Once the discussion is settled along these lines, Cuneo starts by rejecting traditional expressivism. At this stage, he focuses on second-order normative judgments, i.e. judgments such as ‘It is rational for B to believe that p is justified’. Cuneo claims that traditional expressivism (as it appears formulated in Gibbard’s Wise Choices, Apt Feelings (1990)) cannot offer a plausible account of second-order epistemic judgments. By plausible, Cuneo means able to respect the guiding rationale formulated above. I will evaluate this particular charge in what follows.

Cuneo assumes a general platitude about epistemic concepts when he attacks Gibbard’s version of expressivism. Our epistemic merit concepts, he notes, apply non-derivatively to a mental state only if they express either representational or truth-apt contents. After establishing this core platitude about epistemic concepts, Cuneo notes how Gibbard’s expressivism is committed to defend that, when B utters the target sentence (‘that p is justified’) she is expressing an endorsement of a certain norm, i.e. one demanding her to believe p in her present circumstances. But if so, and here is Cuneo’s point, when another speaker (A) utters the second-order epistemic judgment noted above (‘It is rational for B to believe that p is justified’), A is applying such a term to a non-representational, non-truth-apt, mental state—to B’s endorsement of a certain norm. The problem is that this reconstruction goes against the basic platitude about epistemic terms noted before. Hence epistemic expressivism is true only at the price of assuming that epistemic merit concepts do not properly apply to first-order moral judgments. Cuneo concludes that although expressivism is able to avoid an attribution of massive error to our epistemic concepts, it cannot avoid a systematic misapplication of such concepts in some contexts (TNW, 138ff.).

I will make two remarks about Cuneo’s criticism. First, it is not clear how damaging his objection is. After all, second-order epistemic judgments are somehow tangential to our normative practices—at least if we compare them with first-order epistemic judgments. Expressivists endorse this intuition. They stress the action-guiding nature of our normative concepts as their primary rationale. And action-guidance is expressed fundamentally by first-order normative judgments. But if so, it would seem as if Cuneo’s criticism missed the point by focusing on second-order epistemic judgments.

The previous point is surely debatable, so let us assume the centrality of second-order epistemic judgments in our epistemic practices. Even so—and here goes my second remark—it is still not obvious why expressivism cannot make sense of second-order epistemic judgments. Cuneo himself exposes the expres-
sivist solution at some point. He writes:

But what about second-order E-judg-
ments? (...) The analysis of such claims
that I take to be consistent with the norm-
expressivist’s official account of the char-
acter of epistemic thought and discourse
is that such judgment consist in high-
er-order endorsements of a certain kind.
(ibid. 138 (italics added))

As this remark suggests, the key point is to
make clear the kind of endorsement that
norm-expressivism proposes. Remember
that Cuneo’s criticism depended on a dou-
br Improvement: (i) that the kind of endorse-
ment involved in our epistemic concepts is
fixed by the core platitude about truth and
representation, and (ii) that this truth-orient-
ed endorsement works across different lev-
els of epistemic appraisal. Now, surely the
best way to read Gibbard’s expressivism is by
presupposing a certain degree of variability
across levels of endorsement, one that reflects
that our normative appraisals achieve differ-
ent aims. Epistemic concepts could behave
differently at different levels without this
implying conceptual confusion. We could
imagine, for instance, a first-level endorse-
ment where the relevant norms are truth-ori-
ented, i.e. whose basic aim is to get external
stuff right or to get things represented (Gib-
bard 1990, 46). But we could also imagine a
reflexive, second-order endorsement where
the relevant epistemic norms aim to coordi-
nate our reactions (either generally or con-
textually) toward first-order, truth-oriented,
acceptances. These second-order norms are
not necessarily norms whose basic rationale
is to get stuff right. But they are not purely
pragmatic norms either (Gibbard 1990, 36f.,
Shah 2003). They could be hybrid epistemic
norms (norms fixing the degree to which a
speaker’s interests can enter into the assess-
ment of her epistemic situation in the sense
just noted (Stanley 2006)). Or they could
be genuine epistemic norms (norms that do
not range over truth-apt or representational
mental states but that nevertheless can help to
maximize the occurrence of these states (Len-
man 2008)). Hence, where Cuneo is prone to
identify a kind of confusion in the applica-
tion of a range of concepts, the expressivist
can argue back by saying that they are sim-
ply offering a supplemented, somehow revis-
ionary, account of the rationale underlying
such concepts. This general reply, by the way,
would appeal to the very same ecumenical
approach that Cuneo favours on the bound-
aries between moral and epistemic appraisal.

Cuneo, as I noted above, recognises this
possibility. He rejects it because it fails to cap-
ture what we mean to say when we make a
non-derivative second-order epistemic judg-
ment (see especially TNW, 141). But at this
stage Cuneo’s core platitudes are surely doing
a lot of work. I will end this commentary by
noting something about these platitudes.

4.

Cuneo’s appeal to platitudes is central to
his philosophical methodology. And it is so
because the notion of accommodation is cen-
tral for Meta-ethics nowadays. A great majori-
ty of meta-ethicists would be happy to accept
that the accuracy of a given meta-ethical the-
ory is proportional to the way in which such
to makes sense of the core intuitions
about our moral perspective.

But the appeal to platitudes is problemat-
ic. And it is easy to explain why. Sometimes
the very formulation of these platitudes is
implicitly supporting a specific image about
the status of our moral practice, which does
not facilitate a neutral basis to determine
the relative merits of different meta-ethical
accounts. In the case at hand, Cuneo endors-
es a certain platitude about the content of
our epistemic concepts (that they apply non-
derivative to truth-apt or representational
states). Cuneo refers to such a platitude as a
neutral observational basis, and he appeals to
it to debunk some varieties of irrealism. The
discussion described above was an example of
such use. Gibbard’s account of second-order
epistemic judgment will not work to Cuneo’s
lights because it does not accommodate an
important part of what we mean when we
apply an epistemic term. And what we mean
is that something (a belief, a policy, etc) is an
object of epistemic merit because it would
be able to do a good work at representing.
But again it is not difficult to be suspicious of Cuneo’s preferred formulation of this particular platitude. What we want to explain about epistemic concepts is a set of regularities involved in our epistemic practices—how our epistemic concepts are referred to in cases of disagreement, how they are used in first-personal processes of reasoning, how they are the focus of processes of justification, etc. Now, can we extract from this constellation of practices involving epistemic concepts a substantive platitude such as Cuneo’s? I doubt so. As Neil Sinclair writes referring to the surface grammar of our moral language:

(...) to say that moral talk is descriptive would be to say that moral talk involves the expression of mental states that descriptively represent the world in moral ways. And (...) these claims are part of the realist meta-theory (...) It is surely undeniable that moral talk involves moral predication (...) But to assume that it also involves commitment to a certain meta-theoretical understanding of that predication is much more controversial. Better to say that the uncontroversial phenomenon here is the meta-theoretical neutral one of moral predication”. Sinclair, N. (forthcoming)

Sinclair’s remark is important. It points out a sort of methodological constraint in our appeal to platiitudes: we should depict the platiitudes shaping our moral stance along a neutral line of commitment. I suppose that the advice contained here can also be extended to the epistemic domain. Here as well we should be able to describe our practices neutrally, without assuming any metaphysical view about the status of such practice. If we were able to do so, the regulative role played by our platiitudes would be secured.

A major job for Cuneo then is to attain a certain level of neutrality in his appeal to platiitudes. If that neutrality is not secured I doubt that Gibbard’s account of second-order epistemic judgments can be so easily rejected. The same goes for other platiitudes endorsed by Cuneo, e.g. the one about the categorical nature of our moral and epistemic duties. Setting aside this general concern The Normative Web is clearly an important book. It takes a powerful intuition and develops its consequences in a careful way. I strongly recommend it to anyone working on Meta-ethics, Epistemology or Theory of Rationality.

Antonio GAJTÁN TORRES
Universidad de Granada / University of Oxford

REFERENCES


Antirealist views about morality claim that moral facts or truths do not exist. By contrast, The Normative Web provides not merely a defense of robust realism in ethics, but a positive argument for this position. In so doing, it engages with a range of antirealist positions in epistemology such as error theories, expressivist views, and reductionist views of epistemic reasons. These positions, Cuneo claims, come at a prohibitively high theoretical cost. Given this cost, it follows that realism about both epistemic and moral facts is a position that we should find highly attractive.

...more. Get A Copy. Amazon.