

THE NORMATIVE WEB: AN ARGUMENT FOR MORAL REALISM

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TERENCE CUNEO. *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism*. Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 260. ISBN 978-0-19-921883-7. £37.00 (hardback).

Thirty years separate *The Normative Web* from Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, and the celebrated 'argument from queerness' that helped push moral realism onto the defensive (Mackie 1977, pp. 38-42). Cuneo's brand of philosophical judo fittingly commences with a nod to Mackie, in the form of a complaint that he and subsequent anti-realists have failed to acknowledge the devastating implications of their own position: what anti-realists find objectionable about moral facts, suggests Cuneo, they ought to find no less objectionable about the similarly normative realm of epistemic facts, e.g. *that some plan of enquiry is manifestly irrational*. So a position in epistemology, that of support for the existence of epistemic facts, becomes an indirect counterblow for moral realism.

Some philosophical arguments begin with an economical base of premises and surge forwards in pursuit of a conclusion. Others begin with the position to be defended, and work backwards to construct a formidable pyramid of rigorous and broad-based support. *The Normative Web* combines aspects of both templates, and inherits advantages and disadvantages from each.

The overall structure is an elegant one, defined by the book's 'core argument' (p. 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.

Most of the supporting material is then concerned with consolidating support for the premises, principally (1) and (2). ‘Moral realism’, that awkwardly contested label, is fleshed out into a position described as ‘moral realism of a paradigmatic sort’; chapters two and three then seek to establish relevant parity between moral and epistemic facts. Cuneo particularly emphasises the allegedly ‘objectionable features’ which moral facts are supposed to possess, and shows that they have counterparts in the epistemic realm: “properties such as *being intrinsically motivating*, *being categorically reason-giving*, *being explanatorily idle*, and so forth” (p. 8).

Attention then turns to justification for the claim that epistemic facts exist. Cuneo has obvious fun picking holes in any simplistic ‘epistemic nihilism’ which claims that epistemic facts would have to be as an epistemic realist understands them, and that no such facts exist. Such a position is not generally encountered, he explains, but understanding its flaws makes it easier to see the weaknesses of his principal, more sophisticated target: epistemic expressivism, a counterpart to moral expressivism (modelled on it, in fact, for want of people actually defending ‘expressivist’ positions in epistemology). ‘Traditional’ epistemic expressivism denies “either that epistemic claims are truth-apt or that they aim to represent epistemic reality”; ‘non-traditional’ forms deny neither but, in something akin to the manner of Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realist metaethics, they incorporate a deflationist understanding of ‘truth’ and ‘representation’ that aims to do without a realist account of epistemic facts (p. 125).

Chapter seven deals with positions that admit epistemic facts into their ontology, but still of a less ‘robust’ kind than those of full-blooded epistemic realism, since they fall short of what common sense supposedly tells us about the content and authority of epistemic facts; such positions Cuneo calls ‘epistemic reductionism’.

Chapter eight returns to the ‘core argument’ in order to respond to three closing objections: (1.) that if epistemic facts turn out to be ‘indispensable for theorising’ then perhaps they do not, in fact, exhibit parity with moral facts; (2.) that whatever problems epistemic anti-realism may have, for a fair judgment these ought to be compared to whatever difficulties epistemic realism may face; and (3.) that even if moral facts do exist, it remains to be shown that they play the necessary role in our moral discourse for moral realism to be true.

The final objection in particular is dismissed with atypical brevity, reflecting the book’s general emphasis on taking the core argument as

given and valid, and working to consolidate support for its soundness. *The Normative Web* is not, principally, about what the significance would be of the existence of moral facts; but it is one thing for moral facts in general to be *possible*, another for some to be actual, another for any putative moral fact to be actual, yet another for it to be accessible to our linguistic resources, and so on. Cuneo's contention that 'it is difficult to see any reason to believe' in a systematic failure of assertoric discourse to represent moral facts, and that if we can talk about moral facts at all (in order to say things like, 'Moral facts exist') then we are all set to represent (particular) moral facts in our discourse in the ways we might hope to, comes across as a somewhat underdeveloped afterthought—although in fairness, to make it not seem compressed might take another volume (p. 245).

Otherwise, the breadth of argument and of the scholarship surveyed provide the core argument's two leading premises with formidable pyramids of support. Such a structure is, however, quite demanding with respect to the reader's memory, and at times Cuneo compounds the difficulty through a love of taxonomy which sees him supplement the already abundant jargon of metaethics with an array of coinages. That he walls off dedicated sections of the text for the purpose of laying out extended definitions is in itself admirable; and my complaint is not at all simply that *The Normative Web* is, as so many academic works inevitably are, intricate, technical and wholly unsuited to the non-specialist reader. The problem is simply that when I find the 260-page text deploying its own dedicated terminology within the arc of an argument, and decide that I need to check a definition in order to establish exactly what is meant, I find that most of these newly created terms are not indexed. There is no glossary. As a consequence, pulling together the partly non-linear structure of the arguments is made unnecessarily difficult and time-consuming.

That my most pronounced complaint is concerned with the inconvenience involved in cross-referencing rather than with the book's philosophical scholarship might be considered a commendation in disguise; readers tolerant towards metaethical technicality will no doubt find *The Normative Web* a thoroughly researched and perspicaciously argued contribution to the debate concerning moral realism. A contribution, moreover, that opens up the prospect of potentially fruitful methods of conducting moral and epistemological philosophy in light of the suggested parallels between the two.

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