What Cuneo Means by ‘Moral Realism’

The core of the moral realist view, as Cuneo uses the term, is the thesis that moral facts irreducibly exist. Cuneo is not here committing himself to the view that there are different kinds of existence or ways of existing. He just means that there are moral facts, and that these facts are not reducible to any other kind of fact.

If I were to say, “moral facts are not reducible” or “moral facts irreducibly exist,” I would mean at least that they are not identical to facts of another kind—that is, not identical to facts that can be adequately expressed in non-moral language. But this is not what Cuneo means. He means that moral facts are not identical to facts of a kind that fail to satisfy the central platitude of morality—that fail to make true our commonsense conception of morality. According to Cuneo, there are two such platiitudes, a content platitude and an authority platitude (pp. 35–39). Simplifying somewhat, according to the content platitude, morality has fundamentally to do with human well-being. And according to the authority platitude, moral requirements are categorical, in that they give us reasons to act independent of our particular desires, interests, and goals (pp. 38–39). On Cuneo’s usage, a meta-ethical view can be a form of nonreductionism about morality even if, according to it, moral facts are identical to facts of another kind. It will be a form of nonreductionism so long as the facts to which moral facts are identical do respect the central platiitudes about morality.

So, for Cuneo, a reductive view of morality is one that fails to capture enough of our commonsense conception of morality. If someone held, for example, that it really is true that torture is morally wrong, but also held that the fact that torture is morally wrong just is the fact that torture is, say, illegal, then this would be a reductionist view of moral facts if the fact about legality did not capture enough of our shared commonsense beliefs about morality (perhaps such a view would run afoul of the authority platitude). But if someone held that moral facts are, say, just psychological facts (e.g., facts about what we are disposed to value), then this might not be a reductionist view of morality. It would not be reductionist so long as these psychological facts captured enough of our commonsense conception of morality.

Another thing worth mentioning about Cuneo’s understanding of moral realism is that, as he defines it, it is no part of moral realism that moral facts are mind independent. If the moral fact that it is wrong to torture babies for fun is identical to the fact that the moral code of our society prohibits torturing babies for fun, moral realism can still be true, and it will be true, so long as this cultural relativistic theory preserves enough of the platiitudes.


2. There are also linguistic and alethic components to moral realism, but they will not be relevant for our purposes. Also, Cuneo is, strictly speaking, defining ‘moral realism of a paradigmatic sort,’ rather than simply ‘moral realism.’ When I use ‘moral realism,’ we can understand this to be short for ‘moral realism of a paradigmatic sort.’
Moral and Epistemic Descriptivism

Cuneo supports P1, the premise which requires a strong analogy between moral and epistemic realism, in two main ways. First, he identifies what he takes to be four important similarities between epistemic facts and moral facts (pp. 60–80). Second, he claims that the six main objections to the existence of irreducible moral facts apply just as strongly to epistemic facts, so that if we take these objections to give us reason to deny the existence of moral facts, we should also take them to give us reason to deny the existence of epistemic facts (pp. 89–112). These six objections are supposed to show that moral facts, were they to exist, would have certain objectionable features—features many think we should believe that probably nothing has. These are features such as supervening in a mysterious way, being epistemically inaccessible, being explanatorily idle, and others. I will discuss all of them a bit later. Cuneo claims that these features are no less true of epistemic facts, so that if we refuse to countenance moral facts on this basis, we should likewise refuse to countenance epistemic facts.

I want to explore a way to block this claim, by examining the extent to which it is more plausible that epistemic facts are identical to some class of descriptive facts (facts which will not display so many of the objectionable features) than it is that moral facts are identical to some class of descriptive facts.

The two relevant theses are

moral descriptivism: moral facts are identical to descriptive facts

and

epistemic descriptivism: epistemic facts are identical to descriptive facts.

Descriptive facts are facts that are expressed using descriptive terms. Some examples are the facts that snow is white, that Germany invaded Poland, that Bob is in pain, that I agreed to pay back the money I borrowed, and that people prefer happiness to misery. As some of these examples illustrate, all parties should agree that a fact can be a descriptive fact even if it is one that we think prefer happiness to misery. As some of these examples illustrate, all parties should agree that a fact can be a descriptive fact even if it is one that we think is morally relevant. The fact that Bob is in pain is, most people agree, a morally relevant fact, but it is nonetheless a mere descriptive fact about the world.¹

In what follows, I will explain why it seems to me that epistemic descriptivism is more likely to be true than moral descriptivism. I will suggest a class of facts with which epistemic facts might plausibly be identified. I will try to show that the main obstacle to descriptivism—the OQA—makes trouble for moral descriptivism but not for epistemic descriptivism. Then I will explain why, if epistemic descriptivism is true, epistemic facts will not display most of the objectionable features that moral facts (about which descriptivism is not true) display.

3. The term ‘descriptive’ may not be ideal, for some who want to reject the spirit of moral descriptivism will be happy to say that moral statements describe reality. Some therefore prefer the term ‘nonsense’ over ‘descriptive fact,’ and define a nonsense fact as one that is expressed using nonnonsense vocabulary.

The Moral OQA

I will begin with a sympathetic presentation of the OQA as applied to moral facts. Then I will describe an OQA as applied to epistemic facts and invite you to agree that this argument is far less compelling.

I believe that the best way to understand the idea of an open question—in particular, an open yes–no question like ‘This is something we desire, but is it good?’—is in terms of whether one of the possible answers (yes or no) to the question would be self-contradictory, or incoherent. So I believe that, at bottom, Moore’s OQA rests on intuitions about self-contradictoriness. So we may as well get down to brass tacks and state the argument directly in these terms.¹

I will follow Moore in letting the focus of our moral OQA be the axiological notion of goodness, which appears in sentences of ordinary language such as ‘Freedom is good,’ ‘The situation in Iraq is better than it was,’ and ‘The good things in life are free.’ Consider some proposed definition or analysis of this notion, for example, ‘good’ (in the sense just specified) means the same as ‘something we desire.’ According to this analysis, if we say that freedom is good, what we are saying is that freedom is something we desire.

Now ask yourself whether the following claim is self-contradictory: this is something we desire, but it’s not good. We are not asking whether such a claim is ever false. We are asking whether it is self-contradictory, or incoherent, in the way that the claim this person is a bachelor, but he is married is not merely false but self-contradictory. If we heard someone say it, we would presume that he was conceptually confused, and not a competent user of the relevant notions.

I believe that when we reflect on whether the statement ‘this is something we desire, but it’s not good’ is self-contradictory, it seems to us—competent speakers of English, competent users of the term ‘good’—that this statement, in all likelihood, is not self-contradictory. Thus we have:

M1. The statement ‘this is something we desire, but it’s not good’ is not self-contradictory.

M2. If M1, then ‘good’ does not mean the same as ‘something we desire.’

M3. Therefore, ‘good’ does not mean the same as ‘something we desire.’

Thus, the analysis above is shown to be mistaken. Note that it might still be true—necessarily true—that all and only the things that we desire are good; it is just that it is not analytically true.

A.J. Ayer also states his version of the OQA in terms of self-contradictoriness. I will quote him at length, since doing so also serves to illustrate that the argument is meant to apply to any descriptive definition of any moral term:

4. I am not here concerned to be presenting any of Moore’s actual arguments. For a recent interpretation of Moore’s actual arguments, see F. Feldman, “The Open Question Argument: What It Isn’t; and What It Is,” Philosophical Issues, 13 (2005), pp. 22–43. My way of presenting the OQA is more similar to that of A.J. Ayer (see below).
We reject the subjectivist view that to call an action right, or a thing good, is to say that it is generally approved of, because it is not self-contradictory to assert that some actions which are generally approved of are not right, or that some things which are generally approved of are not good. . . . And a similar argument is fatal to utilitarianism [put forth as an analysis, rather than a criterion, of moral rightness]. We cannot agree that to call an action right is to say that of all the actions possible in the circumstances it would cause, or be likely to cause, the greatest happiness, or the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, or the greatest balance of satisfaction over unsatisfied desire, because we find that it is not self-contradictory to say that it is sometimes wrong to perform the action which would actually or probably cause the greatest happiness, or the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, or of satisfaction over unsatisfied desire. And since it is not self-contradictory to say that some pleasant things are not good, or that some bad things are desired, it cannot be the case that the sentence “x is good” is equivalent to “x is pleasant,” or to “x is desired.”

Upon observing this pattern, it is reasonable to conclude that no analysis of the moral in terms of the descriptive will be plausible. This is the conclusion of the moral OQA.

Importantly, the moral OQA is not intended to show that anything that has the descriptive feature in question (being generally approved of, being pleasant, etc.) might not have had the moral feature in question—that there is no necessary connection between the two features. Since all parties agree that the moral supervenes on the descriptive, we all agree that some moral term is necessarily coextensive with some descriptive term. The point is that these necessarily coextensive terms will not be synonymous. The descriptive term cannot serve as an adequate definition of the moral term. If someone claimed that the descriptive term applied to something that the moral term did not, we might correct this person’s false moral belief, but we would not accuse this person of simply failing to understand the meaning of the terms involved.

Advocates of moral OQAs often explain why no descriptive definition of the moral can succeed by appealing to the fact that moral concepts are inherently normative or evaluative, while no merely descriptive concept is. Thus, any analysis of the moral in terms of the descriptive will leave something out. R.M. Hare, another advocate of the moral OQA, believes that no moral term means the same as any descriptive term because descriptive terms leave out the commendatory (or condemnatory) aspect of moral terms. Moral assertions are inherently evaluative in a way that no mere description of things can be.  

The moral OQA casts doubt on analytic descriptivism, the view that moral facts are identical to descriptive facts and that this identity can be discovered via conceptual analysis, or a priori reflection on the meaning of the sentences used to express these facts.  

Objections and Brief Replies to the Moral OQA

Some object that M1, the claim that ‘this is something we desire, but it’s not good’ is not self-contradictory, begs the question, since it is an immediate implication of the target definition that M1 is false.

But M1 does not beg the question, because it is not just asserted; it is evidenced by the fact that it seems to us—ordinary, competent speakers of English—to be true. It is intuitively true. This is evidence that it is true. Note that the intuition that I am claiming has evidential value here is not even a moral intuition, which some may regard as less than reliable. It is a logico-linguistic (partly logical, partly linguistic) intuition, an intuition about whether a certain sentence of English is self-contradictory. Fewer philosophers are prepared to dismiss logico-linguistic intuitions, as it is not clear what other sources of evidence for claims of contradditoriness there could be.

Some object that the reasoning just stated behind M1 assumes that the full meaning of our words is transparently obvious to any competent English speaker. If that is what this reasoning assumes, that would be a problem; but it does not assume that. It assumes only that our intuitions about self-contraditoriness provide evidence of self-contraditoriness. It assumes only that we have at least some insight into the meaning of our words. Surely, no defender of analytic descriptivism, the view the OQA is attacking, could reject this.

Some object that the OQA proves too much, since we could use it to refute any proposed definition of a term whose definition was not obvious, such as: ‘knows’ means the same as ‘has a justified, true belief.’ Imagine if Gettier had instead offered the following as the main premise in his argument: The statement ‘this is a justified, true belief, but it’s not knowledge’ is not self-contradictory. This would have been a bad argument. But advocates of the moral OQA can agree that this is a bad argument without having to say that

7. This is not to deny that we cannot use descriptive terms to commend. A doctor who tells his/her patient that a certain procedure would be less painful might thereby be recommending it. But the remark functions as a recommendation only because it is common ground between the doctor and the patient that a less painful procedure is better. Descriptive terms are not essentially or inherently evaluative in the way moral terms are.
8. This is in contrast to synthetic descriptivism, according to which, although moral facts are identical to descriptive facts, this can be known only a posteriori (just as, if water facts are identical to H₂O facts, this can only be known a posteriori). A different argument is therefore required to refute synthetic descriptivism. Since Cuneo rejects synthetic descriptivism about both the moral and the epistemic domains, I will not discuss these views much here. Incidentally, I reject these views as well, because I do not believe that moral and epistemic terms function the way that synthetic descriptivism about these domains would require them to function. See E. Gampel, “A Defense of the Autonomy of Ethics: Why Value Is Not Like Water,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 26 (1996), pp. 191–210; D. Barnett, “Against A Posteriori Moral Naturalism,” Philosophical Studies, 107 (2002), pp. 239–57.
9. Relatedly, we do not need to be able to produce the correct analysis of some term to know that certain proposed analyses could not be right. I cannot define “x causes y,” but I am certain that it does not mean, say, “x is taller than y.”
their own argument is a bad argument. For the main premise of this Gettier OQA is not intuitively compelling. Maybe the statement ‘this is a justified, true belief, but it’s not knowledge’ is self-contradictory. Or at least this would have been reasonable to think before we were exposed to the Gettier counterexamples of this analysis. The point is that our linguistic and logical intuitions do not speak to this; we do not have the same sort of intuitions about this statement as we do about the moral statement. Since we know about Gettier’s counterexamples, we could of course reason to the claim that ‘this is a justified, true belief, but it’s not knowledge’ is not self-contradictory. But we do not have an immediate logico-linguistic intuition, prior to that reasoning, that it is.

Let me put the point another way. Consider the following definition of ‘circle’: ‘circle’ means the same as ‘the set of all points equidistant from a single point.’ Now consider this claim: The statement ‘this is the set of all points equidistant from a single point, but it’s not a circle’ is not self-contradictory. This claim is not intuitively compelling. Maybe this statement is self-contradictory, maybe it is not. But our logico-linguistic intuitions do not speak to it. The moral OQA is different from OQAs about these other topics, I submit, because the evaluative and the descriptive just seem like two very different categories. The categories sets of points and shapes do not.

This third objection is especially tempting if the moral OQA is presented in the way Moore presented it, by asking us to compare two questions (or other sentences). This way of presenting it can seem to make the argument trade on the fact that, given the target analysis, a sentence like ‘this is something we desire, but it’s not good’ should feel just as self-contradictory as the sentence ‘this is good, but it’s not good.’ This sort of argument would prove too much. ‘This is a brother, but it’s not a brother’ does not have the same feel as ‘this is a male sibling, but it’s not a brother,’ even assuming that we know the corresponding analysis to be correct. But the OQA as I presented it did not make use of this sort of test.

The Epistemic OQA

For the epistemic OQA, I want us to focus on a certain kind of definition of epistemic normativity—of terms like ‘justified belief,’ ‘reasonable belief,’ ‘has reason to believe,’ etc. The basic idea is that these notions can be defined in terms of probability, or what is probably true. For reasons that will become clear shortly, we do not need to get hung up on the precise details of the definition. But one place to start is with a definition such as the following:

‘p is reasonable for S to believe’ means the same as ‘p is likely, given S’s information.’

So when we say that it is reasonable for us to believe that astrology is false, all we mean, on this view, is that this belief is likely to be true, given the information available to us. A closely related idea is that when we say, for example, that your having an experience as of a hand in front of your eyes gives you reason to believe that there is a hand in front of your eyes, all we mean is something like that your having this experience makes it likely that there is a hand in front of your eyes.

You might have all sorts of quibbles concerning the extensional adequacy of this definition. But, for now, suppose that the definition is extensionally adequate (i.e., that in all and only the cases in which it is reasonable for a person to believe something, that thing is likely to be true, given the information available to that person), and consider:

E1. The statement ‘this is likely, given my evidence, but it’s not reasonable for me to believe it’ is not self-contradictory.
E2. If P1, then ‘reasonable for me to believe’ does not mean ‘likely, given my evidence.’
E3. Therefore, ‘reasonable for me to believe’ does not mean ‘likely, given my evidence.’

This argument, I hope you will agree, is not so compelling. The sentence ‘this is likely, given my evidence, but it’s not reasonable for me to believe it’ does have an air of incoherence about it in a way that axiological statements—even such patently false ones like ‘suffering is intrinsically good’—never do. Perhaps my idea here can be made more vivid by considering a concrete case. Suppose I am having a visual experience as of a table in front of me. Suppose this in fact makes it very likely that there is a table in front of me. Now I say, ‘Yes, I see that it’s quite likely to be true that there is a table in front of me, but, still, I don’t think it’s reasonable for me to believe that there is a table in front of me.’ This is a puzzling thing to hear. It seems to be grounds for thinking that I do not really understand what I am saying. At the very least, surely we lack the intuition that such a remark is not self-contradictory, even if we do not, in addition, positively have the intuition that it is self-contradictory. This is not at all how it is in the moral case, where we positively have the intuition that the axiological statement in question is not self-contradictory. This suggests that it might be true that all that reasonable belief amounts to is likely truth and that analytic descriptivism is true of epistemic normativity.

I can get the sentence in question (the one in E1 above) to seem coherent if I interpret ‘reasonable’ to stand not for epistemic reasonability, but for some other kind of reasonability, such as prudential reasonability. If my doctor tells me that there is a 90% chance that I have only 6 weeks to live, it is true that, given my information, it is likely that I have only 6 weeks to live; but still, it may be reasonable for me not to believe this (since if I refuse to believe it, I will be
13. The picture for epistemology is therefore this. Do substantive ‘normative’ epistemology to ‘is likely, given the information available’ are in fact necessarily coextensive, yourself this:

light concerning problem is the analysis above is not quite right, that is okay, so long as you agree that its is a worthwhile project, but would require at least its own paper. So if you think tensive properties on our hands.

argue does in the moral case, that we have two distinct, necessarily coex-

cate, we can plausibly hold that these predicates mean the same thing and we find—by doing substantive epistemology in the traditional way—the

That descriptive analyses of epistemic notions do not leave anything out. Once we find—by doing substantive epistemology in the traditional way—the descriptive predicate that is necessarily coextensive with the epistemic predic-

cate, we can plausibly hold that these predicates mean the same thing and express the same fact. No epistemic OQA will compel us to think, as one such argument does in the moral case, that we have two distinct, necessarily coex-

tensive properties on our hands.12

This point is crucial because if it was otherwise, I would have to get into the business of defending a fully adequate analysis of epistemic reasonability. That is a worthwhile project, but would require at least its own paper. So if you think the analysis above is not quite right, that is okay, so long as you agree that its problem is not the same kind of problem the moral OQA is meant to bring to light concerning its target analysis. Here is yet another way to put the point. Ask yourself this: On the assumption that the predicates ‘is reasonable to believe’ and ‘is likely, given the information available’ are in fact necessarily coextensive, does an analysis of the former in terms of the latter work? Or, does it instead leave something out, and fall prey to the epistemic OQA. In the moral case, I believe we have a strong intuition that something is left out; in the epistemic case, I believe we do not.13

12. Well, that is not the only thing of which the moral OQA could convince someone. The failure of moral descriptivism might convince us, as it has others, to be noncognitivists or error theorists instead.

13. The picture for epistemology is therefore this. Do substantive ‘normative’ epistemology to figure out, for any epistemic term, which descriptive term is necessarily coextensive with it. Then put forth this descriptive term as a definition of the epistemic term. In this way, traditional (normative) epistemology shapes the semantic component of the metapistemological view. Some philosophers hold similar views about the relation between normative ethics and meta-ethics, though these philosophers tend to be ‘synthetic’ descriptivists, and so tend to offer the descriptive predicate (the one they discover, through substantive normative ethical theorizing,

I conclude that there is an important disanalogy between moral and epistemic facts. Since the epistemic OQA fails against the kind of analysis above, we should be optimistic that epistemic facts just are facts about likelihood. And since the moral OQA has force against any descriptive analysis of moral terms, we should be pessimistic about the possibility that moral facts, if they exist, are identical to descriptive facts.14 In a way that will be explained shortly, this casts doubt on P1 of Cuneo’s main argument, which requires a parity, or strong analogy, between the moral and the epistemic.

An Objection: Is Probability Itself Normative?

Perhaps the reason the epistemic OQA fails against its target analysis is that its target analysis is not in fact analyzing away the epistemic notion in the analysandum. Perhaps the key notion in that analyses—the notion of a proposition’s being likely—is itself not merely descriptive, but inherently (epistemically) normative. If it is, then, although the epistemic OQA would fail, its failure would be no evidence for epistemic descriptivism, since the surviving target analysis would not be a descriptive analysis. It would be tantamount to analyzing the notion of goodness in terms of, say, the notion of what it is fitting or appropriate to want; if a normative analysis of goodness such as this fails, it is not because of open-question considerations (such an analysis, whatever its defects, is at least not leaving out the normative dimension of goodness).

How might probability be itself a normative notion? The most natural way is enshrined in a version of the subjective interpretation of probability: A proposition, p, is likely to be true given the available information just in case it is reasonable to believe p, given that information.15 If this is the correct theory of the nature of probability and if the notion of epistemic reasonability contained therein is not amenable to some descriptive analysis, then this would undermine the main argument of this paper.

12. Well, that is not the only thing of which the moral OQA could convince someone. The failure of moral descriptivism might convince us, as it has others, to be noncognitivists or error theorists instead.

13. The picture for epistemology is therefore this. Do substantive ‘normative’ epistemology to figure out, for any epistemic term, which descriptive term is necessarily coextensive with it. Then put forth this descriptive term as a definition of the epistemic term. In this way, traditional (normative) epistemology shapes the semantic component of the metapistemological view. Some philosophers hold similar views about the relation between normative ethics and meta-ethics, though these philosophers tend to be ‘synthetic’ descriptivists, and so tend to offer the descriptive predicate (the one they discover, through substantive normative ethical theorizing,
16. To make the presentation of this argument less clunky, I have omitted the modifier “given the available information.”

Interlude: A Further Reason to Accept Epistemic Descriptivism

Before explaining what the upshot of the difference in plausibility between the moral and epistemic OQAs is for Cuneo’s main argument, I want to take us away from open-question considerations and present an independent argument for epistemic descriptivism, and in particular, for the view that facts about epistemic reasonability just are facts about likelihoods. The argument has to do with the following interesting disanalogy between reasonable belief and reasonable action. If we believe that some belief of ours is not reasonable, we stop holding it. Even if there can be exceptions to this rule, they are rare. We can put the rule another way by saying that there is very little room between holding a belief and thinking it reasonable. But there is much more room between doing an act and thinking it rational. It is depressingy common that I see that some act of mine is not, say, in my long-term interest, but I cannot help myself and I do it anyway. What explains this? Why is there a much tighter connection between believing that some belief of ours is not reasonable and ceasing to hold it than there is between believing that some available act would not be reasonable and refraining from doing it?

The view that to believe that some belief is rational just is to believe that it is likely to be true can explain this. For if believing that some belief of mine is irrational amounts to believing that it is unlikely to be true, then believing that some belief of mine is irrational is the same as believing that the object of the belief is unlikely to be true. And that is the same as disbelieving it. This is why belief about the irrationality of a belief that p entails, or at least is very likely to entail, is reasonable to believe.

The failure of the epistemic OQA suggests that epistemic descriptivism is true. The argument in this section provides further reason to think that epistemic descriptivism is true. Neither of these reasons apply to moral facts.

The Upshot of this Disanalogy

If epistemic facts are identical to descriptive facts, but moral facts are not, this has serious implications for the popular idea that we can argue for moral realism on analogy with epistemic realism. In particular, if epistemic descriptivism is true, then epistemic facts exhibit far fewer of the objectionable features that Cuneo and others claim will plague epistemic facts to whatever extent they plague moral facts. Let us go through five such features:

- Supervenience. Cuneo describes the problem concerning supervenience as follows:

  . . . the problem is that, although realists freely speak of mere descriptive facts ‘determining’ moral facts, they offer no plausible account of what

17. I leave out the discussion of “intrinsic motivation” (pp. 92–98), since I do not believe that epistemic descriptivism affects whether this objectionable feature would attach to epistemic facts.
But here is how things seem to me. First, let me say that I agree that, despite the authoritativeness—would attach to epistemic facts is not completely obvious. It would leave out the normative or prescriptive dimension of moral facts by identifying them with merely descriptive ones. At best, the relation appears to consist in moral facts being bound to mere descriptive facts, in Hilary Putnam’s phrase, by some sort of mysterious ‘metaphysical glue.’ But, on the plausible assumption that there are no such mysterious determination relations, it follows that there are no moral facts. (p. 91)

I agree that this is an important problem concerning moral facts. But if, unlike moral facts, epistemic facts are identical to descriptive facts, there is no corresponding problem for epistemic facts.

Cuneo says that for moral facts, the relation in question cannot be identity, because that would leave out the normative dimension of moral facts by identifying them with descriptive facts. I agree that this is what would happen in the moral case. But Cuneo holds the same for the epistemic case:

To identify the epistemic with the merely descriptive would be to omit the normative or prescriptive dimension of epistemic facts. (p. 92)

But I think that our exploration of the epistemic OQA above shows that this is not the case. Epistemic normativity is definable in terms of the descriptive in a way that moral or axiological value is not. As the failure of the epistemic OQA is made clear, identifying the epistemic with the descriptive seems not to leave anything out.

• Authoritativeness. Attributing this antirealist objection to J.L. Mackie, Cuneo writes,

by claiming that [moral] facts are authoritative, Mackie meant to say that they would have to be the sort of thing that implies, first, that there are moral reasons to conduct ourselves in certain ways and, second, that these reasons inescapably govern our conduct or are categorical. ... whether I have a moral reason to attempt to stop the occurrence of a wicked deed doesn’t depend on whether I have certain cares that would be satisfied by attempting this, or whether so attempting would further my interests, or whether I enjoy a certain type of social standing. But nothing—so the argument goes—answers to this description of a moral fact. If there are any reasons, then they are hypothetical in character; they apply to agents only insofar as they have cares, interests, projects, or social standings of certain kinds. It follows that moral facts don’t exist. (p. 99)

Epistemic descriptivism’s effect on whether this objectionable feature—authoritativeness—would attach to epistemic facts is not completely obvious. But here is how things seem to me. First, let me say that I agree that, despite the truth of epistemic descriptivism, epistemic facts are still authoritative, or categorically reason giving. But if epistemic descriptivism is true, this categoricity may be less objectionable than the categoricity of moral reasons, about which descriptivism is false. If epistemic normativity is characterizable in purely descriptive terms, this suggests that, in some sense, epistemic normativity is not real normativity. If some belief is unreasonable, we do not really have to stop holding it. True, it would be epistemically irrational not to, but this is to say no more than that the belief is not likely to be true; it is not to say that we really must stop believing it. In other words, epistemic reasons are faux reasons (they are on a par with, say, “etiquettical reasons”). But still, these faux reasons that epistemic facts imply are categorical faux reasons. When it is true that it is epistemically reasonable for a person to believe something (in other words, that thing is likely to be true given his/her evidence), the reason here holds independently of his/her desires, interests, goals, etc. Epistemic reasons are in this way categorical. So the platitude (if it is a platitude) that epistemic reasons are categorical is not violated. Cuneo might insist that it is violated, since these are not real categorical reasons. But since, if epistemic reasons are faux, it is the failure of the epistemic OQA that reveals this, it cannot be a platitude that epistemic reasons are both categorical and real. If this was a platitude, the epistemic OQA would be more compelling.

Here is one way to try to flesh this out: The terms ‘reason,’ ‘reasonable,’ etc., are ambiguous. On one reading, they involve genuine normativity: If you have reason to do something, and no other reasons are in play, then you really have to do it. On another reading, such as the epistemic reading, these expressions are definable in non-normative terms; if you have an epistemic reason to believe something, you do not really have to believe it. All we are saying rather is that, that thing is probably true, given the available information. My contention is that the failure of the epistemic OQA suggests that ordinary ascriptions of epistemic reasons take the latter reading. Epistemic reasons are reasons, if only because it is appropriate to use the word ‘reason’ to stand for them. But these reasons are not really binding, or normative. They are, nevertheless, categorical, in that whether a person has an epistemic reason to believe something does not depend upon the person’s desires, interests, and goals. That they are categorical in this way simply follows from the fact that whether a proposition is likely to be true, given some person’s available information, does not depend upon the person’s desires, interests, and goals.

• Epistemic inaccessibility. Here is how Cuneo describes the problem:

... we don’t have any explanatorily informative story about how we could gain epistemic access to moral facts. That is, we do not have any informative account of how facts about what morally ought to be the case impinge on our cognitive faculties so as to produce the corresponding states of knowledge.... In light of this failure, it is best to conclude that there is no explanation available. But on the assumption that, if moral facts were to exist, then some such explanation would be available, it follows that moral facts do not exist.
I think it should be admitted that this argument poses a serious challenge to moral realism. (pp. 100–1)

I agree. Cuneo goes on to claim the following, however:

But I take it to be fairly plain that the argument poses an equally serious challenge to epistemic realism. (p. 101)

I agree that if descriptivism was as untenable in the epistemic realm as it is in the moral realm, then this problem would pose an equally serious challenge to epistemic realism. But if, instead, epistemic facts are identical to descriptive facts, as the failure of the epistemic OQA suggests, then the problem vanishes, because we can know epistemic facts by knowing the descriptive facts to which they are identical. We can know what we have reason to believe by coming to know what is likely to be true. Moreover, we can also come to know which descriptive facts epistemic facts are identical to (such as facts about likelihoods). We can know this via conceptual analysis.

- Explanatory idleness. Cuneo describes this problem as follows:

  ... were moral facts to exist, at least the following must be true: Such facts would have to explain the existence of non-moral facts of a sufficiently wide array of types. ... an ordinary descriptive fact such as that the rocks are wet can explain the existence of facts of many different sorts. ... By contrast, ... a putative moral fact such as that an act is wrong does not directly explain any states of affairs in the world that do not involve propositional attitudes; arguably, it doesn’t do anything at all. If this is right, however, then the putative moral fact that an act is wrong—and presumably any other putative moral fact—fails to satisfy [this explanatory requirement]. From which it follows that moral facts do not exist. (p. 104)

I believe that considerations in this neighborhood provide an important challenge to moral realism, if descriptivism is false about moral facts. Cuneo claims that:

when suitably modified, the argument we’re now considering (if sound) yields a similar conclusion regarding epistemic facts. (p. 105)

But not if descriptivism is true of epistemic facts, as the failure of the epistemic OQA suggests. If epistemic descriptivism is true, epistemic facts will play explanatory roles, because the descriptive facts to which they are identical will.

- Lack of agreement. Cuneo describes the familiar idea that:

  ... there is massive and seemingly ineradicable disagreement among otherwise competent parties concerning certain kinds of moral issues.

He goes on to advance the original and provocative idea that there is also ineradicable disagreement over epistemic matters, particularly over the extent to which religious belief is epistemically justified.

Epistemic descriptivism has less obvious of a role to play in showing epistemic facts to be disanalogous with respect to this allegedly objectionable feature. Nonetheless, I will close this section by mentioning one way in which epistemic descriptivism might be thought to help eradicate seemingly ineradicable disagreement over epistemic matters. One could resolve the disagreement by first engaging in conceptual analysis on the epistemic normative notions (as mentioned in the previous subsection). Then we could apply the resulting analysis to the problem cases. This would be to do in the epistemic domain exactly what G.E. Moore was at such pains to establish, through his open-question argument, that one could not do in the moral domain:

... if I am right, then nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that ‘Pleasure is the only good’ or that ‘The good is the desired’ on the pretence that this is ‘the very meaning of the word.’

Since the epistemic OQA fails, perhaps one can foist epistemic axioms such as that “What’s reasonable to believe is what’s probable” on the grounds that this is the very meaning of the word.

Conclusion

Cuneo’s aim is to establish moral realism by appeal to a putative analogy with epistemic realism. My goal has been to raise a problem for this analogy. I have tried to show, via consideration of OQAs, that it is more likely that epistemic facts are identical to descriptive facts than it is that moral facts are identical to descriptive facts. I have also tried to show why, if in fact epistemic but not moral descriptivism is true, most of the main objections I have thus tried to call into question P1 of Cuneo’s main argument, the idea that if you are an epistemic realist (as most people are), you should also be a moral realist.

19. Admittedly, it is not clear how powerful this strategy would be in resolving disputes over what is reasonable to believe, for such disputes would surely just be replaced by disputes over what is probably true. Still, perhaps this is some progress.
20. For helping me improve this paper by giving me comments on earlier drafts, I am grateful to Matt Bedke, Eric Chwong, Bob Hanna, Tom Metcalf, and Michael Rubin.