Moral Truth and Hume's Fork: The Prospects of Reconciliation

by
Clark Embleton

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

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in partial fulfillment of
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degree of

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(Honors Scholar)

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Clark Embleton for the degree of <u>Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Physics</u> presented on May 27, 2020. Title: <u>Moral Truth and Hume's Fork: The Prospects of Reconciliation</u>.

Abstract approved:_____

Allen Thompson

Hume's division of truth into agreement with matters of fact or relations of ideas casts doubt on our capacity to have moral knowledge, as moral propositions do not seem to fall obviously into either category. This thesis looks at how two views, 'descriptive moral functionalism' and 'moral concept essentialism', try to account for moral truth as agreement to matter of fact and relations of ideas, respectively. Descriptive moral functionalism uses our folk-theoretic template of moral intuitions to try to fix the truth conditions for when a state of affairs possesses a moral property. Moral concept essentialism tries to find a place for moral truth among relations of ideas by appealing to the essences of concepts. I conclude that both views are unsatisfactory and that this should motivate us to look for other accounts of moral truth if we want to preserve our claim to moral knowledge.

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Clark Embleton, Author

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1. Introduction

Normativity is entrenched in society as it guides our beliefs, actions, feelings, and language. We expect our beliefs to be based on evidence and feel more confident in our beliefs as the evidence accumulates. We strive to live up to moral codes, whether personal, cultural, or professional, and these codes are often reflected in laws and practices. When a tragedy occurs, we feel sorrow, and expect others to feel the same. If I point to a flying, feathered animal and call it a 'dog' you will be baffled, but if I call it a 'bird' you will think nothing of it. It goes without saying that norms are an indispensable part of human life.

Morality is a species of the normative. We evaluate the rightness and wrongness of actions, compare the value of goods and evils, categorize people as virtuous and vicious, and decry violations of rights. Moral judgments are concerned with what *ought* to be the case and can be distinguished from judgments about what *is* the case. 'People should not be discriminated against based on the color of their skin' is a moral judgment, whereas 'Humans have different colors of skin' is a purely descriptive judgment. While both claims are widely accepted today, the claim that racism is wrong was denied by many for millennia. Do we know that racism is wrong? If we do possess that knowledge, which certainly seems to be the case, then our belief that racism is wrong must be true.

Truth is a notoriously difficult topic[1] that has engaged philosophers since the time of antiquity[2]. I will use Hume as an entry point into the topic of truth, as Hume captures what I take to be a commonsense view of truth. As will be shown, Hume's view raises questions about the truth-aptness of moral judgments and, in turn, moral knowledge. A judgment is truth-apt if it can

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[1] For an introduction to the philosophical issues surrounding truth see Kirkham (1992).
[2] See Szaif (2018) for a discussion of Plato and Aristotle's views on truth.

bear a truth value of 'true' or 'false'. For example, the belief that four is the sum of one and three

seems truth-apt, whereas the desire to climb a mountain does not seem truth-apt. Hume, in both

his *Treatise* and *Enquiries*, discusses truth as the object of reason:

> Reason is the discovery of truth or fals[e]hood. Truth or fals[e]hood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the real relations of ideas, or to real existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement, is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of our reason.
>
> Hume *Treatise of Human Nature* Book III, Part I, Sect. I

> All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*.
>
> Hume *Enquiry Concerning the Human Understanding* [EHU] Sect. IV, Part I

This division between relations of ideas and matters of fact has become known as

Hume's Fork because, according to Hume, a proposition[3] is true if and only if it agrees with a

real relation of ideas or a matter of fact. Judgments that concern relations of ideas are an

"affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain… [and] …discoverable by the

mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe",

whereas "the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a

contradiction".[4] For example, 'Thirteen is prime' and 'Bachelors are unmarried men' are true

propositions that concern relations of ideas. 'Oregon is north of California' is an example of a

true proposition that concerns a matter of fact. Before discussing the challenge Hume's Fork

poses for ethical truth I want to expand on the distinction between matters of fact and relations of

ideas. Much of what follows is drawn from Georges Dicker's second chapter in *Hume's*

Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction (Dicker 1998), which provides an exegesis of

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[3] At this stage, the term 'proposition' will simply stand for whatever turns out to the be the primary truth-bearer.
[4] Hume (EHU Sect. IV, Part I).

Hume's work concerning this fork.[5]

 In characterizing the difference between relations of ideas and matters of fact it will be helpful to draw two further distinctions: the *a prior/a posteriori* distinction and the analytic/synthetic distinction. A proposition is *a priori* knowable if it can be known solely by understanding the relevant concepts contained in the proposition. It is often said that a proposition is *a priori* knowable if it can be known without experience. This is a little misleading because we need experience to become competent with the concepts in a proposition. So, a proposition can be said to be *a priori* knowable if it can be known without experience except that which is required to become competent with the concepts that constitute the proposition. A proposition is *a posteriori* knowable if, in order for it to be known, experience beyond competency with the relevant concepts is required. For example, 'All bachelors are unmarried' is an example of an *a priori* knowable proposition because once you have acquired the concept 'bachelor' you can see that all bachelors are unmarried. 'I weigh less than 200 pounds' is *a posteriori* knowable because you need to have an experience that informs you of your weight in order to know whether this statement is true or false.

 While the *a priori/a posteriori* distinction is epistemic, the analytic/synthetic distinction is semantic. A proposition is analytic if it is true or false in virtue of the meaning of its terms. This includes propositions that are definitionally true, such as 'Bachelors are unmarried men', propositions that are true because of the concepts expressed by the terms, such as 'Four is the sum of one and three', and propositions that are true because of their logical form, such as 'Either *x* is *p* or not *p*'. The denial of any analytically true propositions is a contradiction. A proposition is synthetic if it is not analytic, so its truth conditions do not involve only the

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[5] Dicker (1998)

meanings of the constituent terms. The previous example, 'I weigh less than 200 pounds', is also an example of a synthetic statement.

These four terms can be combined in four ways to yield propositions that are analytic *a priori*, analytic *a posteriori*, synthetic *a priori*, or synthetic *a posteriori*. Among philosophers who recognize the analytic/synthetic distinction,[6] it is widely agreed that there are instances of analytic *a priori* and synthetic *a posteriori* propositions. It is also widely agreed that there are no instances of analytic *a posteriori* propositions. What is controversial is whether there are instances of synthetic *a priori* propositions, and it is this class of propositions that Hume takes issue with.[7]

In which of these four categories do propositions that concern relations of ideas and matters of fact fall under? Hume's description of relations of ideas as "discoverable by the mere operation of thought" suggests that he views propositions concerning relations of ideas as *a priori* knowable. The claim that "the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction" suggests that Hume holds that matters of fact are synthetic. If we rule out the analytic *a posteriori*, then this leaves three classes of propositions under which propositions concerning relations of ideas and matters of fact could fall under.

Let's consider the case where propositions concerning relations of ideas are only analytic *a priori*, and propositions concerning matters of fact are only synthetic *a posteriori*. Hume's Fork becomes (HF1).

(HF1) Attributions of truth or falsity only apply to propositions that are analytic *a priori*

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[6] Not all philosophers believe there is a genuine distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. Most notably Quine challenged this distinction in Quine (1951).

[7] Dickens and I recognize that Hume does not use the analytic/synthetic and *a priori/a posteriori* framework to capture his fork, but this anachronistic characterization will introduce terminology that will be needed in the subsequent sections.

or synthetic *a posteriori*.

A problem quickly arises with this characterization, for (HF1) seems to fall into neither category. Hume's thesis does not seem to be obviously analytic nor does it seem to be *a posteriori*.[8] To rescue Hume's Fork, the thesis must be an example of the synthetic *a priori*. In that case, (HF1) is false.

With this insight we can return to the question of which categories propositions concerning relations of ideas and matters of fact fall into. I will follow Dickens in reformulating Hume's Fork such that propositions concerning relations of ideas include both the analytic *a priori* and the synthetic *a priori*, and propositions concerning matters of fact concern only the synthetic *a posteriori*. There is, however, a restriction that needs to be put on what type of propositions can be synthetic *a priori* in order to keep with the spirit of Hume's work. Hume does not admit of synthetic *a priori* propositions that assert or imply the existence of any entity. He makes this clear by saying the following:

> All other enquiries of men regard only matter of fact and existence; and these are evidently incapable of demonstration. Whatever *is* may *not be*. No negation of a fact can involve a contradiction…The existence, therefore, of any being can only be proved by arguments from its cause or its effect; and these arguments are founded entirely on experience.
>
> <div align="right">Hume [EHU] Sect. XII, Part III</div>

This passage suggests that in reformulating Hume's Fork we should regard propositions concerning matters of fact as strictly synthetic *a posteriori*, and instead liberalize propositions concerning relations of ideas to include synthetic *a priori* claims that do not assert or imply the existence of any entity. Hume's Fork can now be reformulated.

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[8] Dickens discusses the case of Hume's Fork being unobviously analytic but concludes that this seems unlikely.

(HF2)   Attributions of truth or falsity only apply to propositions that are synthetic *a posteriori* or propositions that are *a priori* which do not assert or imply the existence of any entities.[9]

(HF2) is not as problematic as (HF1), because (HF2) can be held to be an instance of a synthetic *a priori* proposition that does not assert or imply the existence of any entities.

What about the judgment that racism is wrong? Does this express a proposition that concerns a relation of ideas or a matter of fact? Hume contends that it is neither. According to Hume, the relations that are demonstrable by thought alone are resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity and number.[10] These relations apply to things that we ascribe moral properties to, such as actions, emotions, and intentions, and to things which we do not ascribe moral properties to, such as inanimate matter and non-sentient life. Hume takes this observation to suggest that moral judgments are not relations among ideas.[11] Next, Hume attacks the claim that empirical investigation can discover moral distinctions by noting that moral categories such as good, bad, right, wrong, etc. do not seem to be perceivable. In Hume's words, "Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts… the vice entirely escapes you".[12]

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[9] So a propositions that is analytic *a priori* or synthetic *a priori* can be true, but not if it asserts or implies the existence of any entities.
[10] Hume (*Treatise* Book I, Part III, Sect. I and Book III, Part I, Sect. I)
[11] Hume (*Treatise* Book III, Part I, Sect. I)
[12] Hume (*Treatise* Book III, Part I, Sect. I)

Hume's own view is that the source of moral distinction is not reason, but the sentiments of human nature. He defends this claim by appealing to his theory of motivation; "reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and secondly, it can never oppose passion in the direction of will".[13] This thesis is then combined with the claim that the moral is action-guiding, that is, "morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions".[14] If reason is not capable of motivating and morals are intrinsically motivating, then moral content cannot be derived from reason alone.

Hume's conclusions seem to commit him to the claim that moral judgments are not truth-apt. This, in turn, implies that we lack moral knowledge, for knowledge requires truth. This is a remarkable conclusion, for I claim to know that racism is wrong, as do many others. When one reaches remarkable conclusions, there is a greater need to re-evaluate the premises in the argument to see if they are in fact true. I will try to reconstruct Hume's argument put forth so far.

1. Knowledge that p requires that p is true.[15] (p is a proposition)

2. Propositions are only true (false) when they agree (disagree) with relations of ideas or matters of fact. (HF2)

3. Moral judgments are neither relations of ideas nor matters of fact. (Hume's claim)

4. Therefore, moral judgments are not true of false. (From 2 & 3)

5. Therefore, we lack moral knowledge. (From 1 & 4)

The argument is valid and has only three premises. I will not challenge the first two

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[13] Hume (*Treatise* Book II, Part III, Sect. III)
[14] Hume (*Treatise* Book III, Part I, Sect. I)
[15] Here I am referring to knowledge *that* something is the case, not knowledge of *how* to do something. Knowledge *that* something is the case may require more than mere true judgment. For example, being justified or not coming to believe something by accident may be additional requirements for the possession of knowledge *that* something is the case.

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premises, even though I recognize that there are certainly other accounts of truth.[16] This leaves

the third and final premise. The aim of this thesis will be to assess the ways in which

contemporary philosophers have challenged the third premise in order to resist (5). Specifically, I

will look at the work of Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, who argue that ethical truth is a type of

descriptive matter of fact, and Terence Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, who argue that ethical truth

concerns relations of ideas. I will call the positions of Jackson and Pettit 'descriptive moral

functionalism' (DMF) and the positions of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 'moral concept

essentialism' (MCE). The motivation for these labels will become apparent in the third and fifth

sections where these views will be covered in detail.

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[16] For example, the correspondence theory of truth, coherence theory of truth, identity theory of truth, pragmaticism, instrumentalism, and minimalism.

2. Moore's Challenge

Before presenting DMF and MCE I want to preface both views with the work of G. E. Moore. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, written at the beginning of the 20th century, poses a challenge to any philosophical project aiming to account for the truth of moral propositions with natural matters of fact or by analyzing moral concepts in terms of purely descriptive concepts. I draw on Moore, not only because of the immense influence his work has had on the state of contemporary metaethics, but because Jackson, Pettit, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau, recognize that each of their positions must navigate Moore's challenges.

In what follows I will rely on Moore's view as presented in the first chapter of his *Principia Ethica*, where he enquires into the "subject-matter of ethics".[17] To Moore, the fundamental ethical question is "What is good?", which leads Moore to seek a definition of 'good'.[18] But, under the notion that a definition concerns understanding the nature of a concept, Moore proffers only the claim that "[good] cannot be defined".[19] What this means is that a proposition expressing moral truth is synthetic, so "nobody can foist upon us such an axiom as that 'Pleasure is the only good' or that 'The good is the desired' on the preten[s]e that this is 'the very meaning of the word'".[20] Moore contends that no definition of 'good' is possible because 'good' is a simple notion and only complex notions can be defined. For example, 'bachelor' is a complex notion that can be defined as 'an unmarried man', whereas, according to Moore, 'yellow' is a simple notion.[21] Moore clarifies his position by explaining that, while he does not think 'good' is definable, he does think that "the good" is definable, where "the good" are those

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[17] Moore (2004)
[18] Moore (2004) pg. 3
[19] Moore (2004) pg. 6. To be clear, Moore is not concerned with how people have defined the word 'good', instead he is concerned with the concept that he thinks people normally express by the word 'good'. This is why I say that the notion of definition that Moore has in mind concerns the "nature of an idea".
[20] Moore (2004) pg. 7
[21] Moore (2004) pg. 10.

things to which 'good' applies. Just as there is a difference between 'yellow' and the objects that are yellow, so Moore contends there is a difference between 'good' and the things that are good.

In order to lend support to the claim that 'good' is indefinable, Moore presents a host of related arguments in the following lengthy passage.[22]

> The hypothesis that disagreement about the meaning of good is disagreement with regard to the correct analysis of a given whole, may be most plainly seen to be incorrect by consideration of the fact that, whatever definition be offered, it may be always asked, with significance, of the complex so defined, whether it is itself good. To take, for instance, one of the more plausible, because one of the more complicated, of such proposed definitions, it may easily be thought, at first sight, that to be good may mean to be that which we desire to desire. Thus 'That we should desire to desire *A* is good' is *not* merely equivalent to be that which we desire to desire. Thus if we apply this definition to a particular instance and say 'When we think that A is good, we are thinking that A is one of things which we desire to desire,' our proposition may seem quite plausible. But, if we carry the investigation further, and ask ourselves 'Is it good to desire to desire A?' it is apparent, on a little reflection, that this question is itself as intelligible as the original question 'Is A good?' – that we are, in fact, now asking for exactly the same information about the desire to desire A for which we formerly asked with regard to A itself. But it is also apparent that the meaning of this second question cannot be correctly analysed into 'Is the desire to desire A one of the things which we desire to desire?': we have not before our minds anything so complicated as the question 'Do we desire to desire to desire to desire A?' Moreover any one can easily convince himself by inspection that the predicate of this proposition – 'good' – is positively different from the notion of 'desiring to desire' which enters into its subject: 'That we should desire to desire A is good' is *not* merely equivalent to 'That *A* should be good is good.' It may indeed be true that what we desire to desire is always also good; perhaps, even the converse may be true: but it is very doubtful whether this is the case, and the mere fact that we understand very well what is meant by doubting it, shews clearly that that we have two different notions before our minds.

I have no intention of teasing out all the different arguments in this complicated passage, as others have done.[23] I also do not want to engage in extensive Moorean exegesis, instead, I want to provide a charitable interpretation of Moore's claims that shows why many philosophical

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[22] Moore (2004) pg. 15-16
[23] Kalderon (2004); Feldman (2005); Piervincenzi (2007);

projects since Moore have been in some way a reaction to Moore's challenge.

The first thing to note is that Moore's arguments are concerned with the meaning of the term 'good', not the nature of the property that 'good' denotes.[24] The following reconstruction of Moore's argument is broken up into two sections: the open question argument and the robust nonnaturalism argument. The open question argument is, I think, closer to what Moore was arguing for, while the robust nonnaturalism argument is not what I think Moore was arguing for, even if he subscribed to its conclusion.

Open Question Argument[25]

Consider the following two questions and two definitions.

> (Q1) Granted that *x* <u>is what we desire to desire</u>, is *x* good?
>
> (Q2) Granted that *x* <u>is good</u>, is *x* good?
>
> Open question $=_{\text{def}}$ a question that can be asked with significance
>
> Closed question $=_{\text{def}}$ a question that cannot be asked with significance

1. If two expressions differing only in the substitution of one group of terms for another do not mean the same, then the two groups of terms do not mean the same.

2. Q1 and Q2 differ only in the substitution of 'is good' in Q2 for 'is what we desire to desire' in Q1.

3. Therefore, if Q1 and Q2 do not mean the same, then 'is good' and 'is what we desire to desire' do not mean the same. (from 1 & 2)

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[24] Moore does, in the concluding paragraph of the first chapter of the *Principia*, say "This property [goodness], by reference to which the subject-matter of Ethics must be defined, is itself simple and indefinable". This would suggest that Moore thought he showed that goodness was a simple and indefinable property, which is a metaphysical claim. However, his description of goodness as "indefinable" suggest that he also might have meant to show that the concept 'good' was not susceptible to analytic definitions, as concept are indefinable, not properties. It seems to me that Moore, at times, does not carefully distinguish between properties and concepts, but I think the passages already quoted from Moore suggest that he was concerned with concepts.

[25] This reconstruction of the open question argument is adapted from Kalderon (2004). I have simplified it some to make it more readable.

4. If Q1 and Q2 mean the same, then Q1 and Q2 are both either closed or open.

5. Q1 is open

6. Q2 is closed

7. Therefore, Q1 and Q2 do not mean the same. (From 4, 5, & 6 by *modus tollens*)

8. Therefore, 'is good' and 'is what we desire to desire' do not mean the same.

   (From 3 and 7)

Robust Nonnaturalism Argument

9. Predicates that are not synonymous pick out different properties.[26]

10. Therefore, the property of being good is not the property of being what we desire to

    desire.

While this argument uses 'what we desire to desire' as the alleged definition of 'good', we can

extend the argument to any alleged definition of good by substituting the new definition for

'what we desire to desire'. If all definitions of 'good' yield an open question, and the rest of the

argument is sound, then 'good' is indefinable. If (9) is true and good is indefinable, then, if good

picks out a property at all, it picks out a property that is *sui generis* (i.e. in a category of its own).

I will call the thesis that there are *sui generis* moral properties and facts 'robust nonnaturalism'.

     The well-known objection to the robust nonnaturalism argument is that two terms can

pick out the same object or property without being synonymous. Frege, for example, accounted

for this by distinguishing between the "sense" and "reference" of a referential piece of

language.[27] The sense of a referential piece of language is the "mode of presentation", or

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[26] Predicates are parts of propositions that state something about the subject of the proposition and can ascribe properties. Predicates are said to apply to the subject when the subject possesses the property ascribed. For example, the predicate 'has a mass of 9.11×10^{-31} kg' applies to electrons but not to protons. If the sentence 'An electron has a mass of 9.11×10^{-31} kg' is true, then the electron is said to satisfy the predicate.

[27] Frege (1966)

meaning, whereas the reference is the thing referred to. So, for example, 'evening star' and 'morning star' have different senses but the same reference, Venus.

If the robust nonnaturalism argument is not sound, then what about the open question argument? If the open question argument is meant to be a deductive argument, then I also think it is unsound. The first reason hinges on what is meant by 'can be asked with significance'. Is being an open question a semantic matter or an epistemic matter? If it is a semantic matter, such that a question is open, say, if an answer in the affirmative[28] is synthetic, then the open question argument becomes circular.[29] This is because if the terms are synonymous, then an affirmative answer is analytic. Take for example, 'Granted, x is pleasurable, is x good?' Under this definition of 'open', the question is open if 'Yes, granted that x is pleasurable, x is good' is synthetic. If the terms are synonymous, however, then the sentence is analytic; 'Yes, granted that x is good, x is good'. Contraposing this conditional shows that if the sentence is synthetic, then the terms are not synonymous, so (5) assumes what is to be proved.

If being an open question is an epistemic matter so that, say, a question is open if an answer in the affirmative is doubtable, or at least doubt is understandable, by speakers competent with the terms in the question, then a new objection arises. It seems that two terms can be synonymous and yet the corresponding question can still be open. To take an example from Salmon, a speaker may learn the terms 'ketchup' and 'catsup' by reading different labels, for example, and come to believe that they are similar, but not identical sauces, even after having ketchup on many occasions.[30] To such a speaker, the proposition 'Granted x is ketchup, x is catsup' is capable of being doubted, and, therefore, the corresponding question is open even

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[28] The answer is 'yes' or 'no', but what is synthetic is the proposition being affirmed or denied by the yes or no answer, which is 'Granted x is D, x is M' where D contains only descriptive terms and M contains only moral terms.
[29] This point was made by Ball (1988)
[30] Salmon (1989)

though the terms are synonymous.

The epistemic criterion for being an open question avoids circularity but is open to counterexamples. It also uses competent speaker's attitudes towards a proposition as a guide to the meaning of the proposition. As the 'ketchup' and 'catsup' example shows, competent speakers are not infallible guides to meaning, but as Ball notes, "There is something commonsensical, after all, about testing theories of word meaning by the linguistic behavior and attitudes of native speakers; indeed, there is otherwise some problem as to the sense in which "theories" of meaning are to be tested at all".[31] What we might be able to say, then, is that if questions like Q1 and Q2 have the same sense, then speakers competent with the terms in Q1 and Q2 should find Q1 and Q2 to be closed. This would bias our expectations in favor of (4), while allowing this bias to be defeasible.

There is another problem with the open question argument, and that is that it assumes that (5) is true. The critic of the open question argument can dig in their heels and hold either that their proposed definition does not in fact yield an open question, or that the correct definition, which we may have yet to discover, would not be open. Perhaps (5) can be defended as an inference to best explanation. If speakers competent with the terms in Q1 tend to believe that Q1 is open, then one could argue that the best explanation of this observation is that Q1 is in fact open. Framed this way, Moore's open question argument becomes a challenge to anyone looking to define a moral concept in terms of purely descriptive concepts. The challenge is to find a definition of a moral concept for which speakers competent with the terms in the corresponding question tend to believe that the question is closed. Some of what Moore says reflects this interpretation.[32]

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[31] Ball (1988)
[32] Moore (2004) pg. 16

But whoever will attentively consider with himself what is actually before his mind when he asks the question 'Is pleasure (or whatever it may be) after all good?' can easily satisfy himself that he is not merely wondering whether pleasure is pleasant. And if he will try this experiment with each suggested definition in succession, he may become expert enough to recognise that in every case he has before his mind a unique object, with regard to the connection of which with any other object, a distinct question may be asked.

At this point I want to reconstruct the open question argument in a weakened form.

Open Question Challenge

(Q1) Granted that x <u>is what we desire to desire</u>, is x good?

(Q2) Granted that x <u>is good</u>, is x good?

Open question $=_{def}$ a question such that a speaker competent with the terms in the question can understand how an answer in the affirmative is doubtable.

Closed question $=_{def}$ a question such that a speaker competent with the terms in the question cannot understand how an answer in the affirmative is doubtable.

1. If two expressions differing only in the substitution of one group of terms for another do not mean the same, then the two groups of terms do not mean the same.

2. Q1 and Q2 differ only in the substitution of 'is good' in Q2 for 'is what we desire to desire' in Q1.

3. Therefore, if Q1 and Q2 do not mean the same, then 'is good' and 'is what we desire to desire' do not mean the same. (from 1 & 2)

4. If Q1 and Q2 have the same sense, then competent speakers should find Q1 and Q2 both either closed or open.

5. Competent speakers tend to find Q1 open.

6. Competent speakers tend to find Q2 closed.

7. The best explanation of 5 is that Q1 is open.

8. The best explanation of 6 is that Q2 is closed.

9. Therefore, we expect that Q1 and Q2 do not mean the same.

10. Therefore, we expect that 'is good' and 'is what we desire to desire' do not mean the same.

This is a challenge to any proposed definition of goodness, not an argument intended to show that all proposed definitions are incorrect. The open question challenge relies on two empirical claims, (5) and (6). If (5) and (6) are not empirically supported, then this would undermine the argument. Let's assume that these observations are empirically supported, then the open question challenge asserts that the best explanation of (5) is that the question is in fact open, perhaps because it is the simplest explanation. Furthermore, just because if Q1 and Q2 have the same sense, then Q1 and Q2 should both either be closed or open, this does not rule out alternative explanations that account for how Q1 is open, Q2 closed, and Q1 and Q2 mean the same. While Moore failed to provide a sound deductive argument that showed that moral terms are not definable in nonmoral terms, it seems he said enough to put those claiming to give a definition of moral concepts in terms of purely descriptive concepts on the defensive.

At the beginning of this section I said that Moore provided a challenge to those claiming to account for moral truth with natural matters of fact, but I quickly dismissed the robust nonnaturalism argument. Now I want to return to my claim that Moore presents a challenge to those claiming to account for moral truth with natural matters of fact, a view called moral naturalism. Let's assume that moral predicates are not synonymous with descriptive predicates, as Moore held. If this is true, then moral naturalists who want to hold that some descriptive predicate ascribes the same property as a moral predicate seem to owe us some explanation of why two nonsynonymous predicates ascribe the same property. This burden of explanation is the challenge Moore poses to moral naturalism. Jackson, Pettit, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau's

positions are a reaction to Moore's challenges and as I proceed to present their views I will try to make clear how these philosophers' projects are shaped, and still challenged, by Moore.

3. Descriptive Moral Functionalism

Jackson and Pettit have developed and defended a version of ethical naturalism that they have called both 'moral functionalism' and 'analytic descriptivism'.[33] I will refer to their view as 'descriptive moral functionalism' (DMF) because their view makes two central claims:

a) An ethical predicate applies to a state of affairs if and only if the state of affairs possesses the property that satisfies the functional role specified by the system of mature folk morality for that predicate.

b) The properties that satisfy the functional roles specified by the system of mature folk morality are descriptive properties.

The ideas behind claims (a) and (b) are that moral truth is a 'matter of fact' and that this matter of fact involves purely descriptive properties. In what follows, I will present Jackson and Pettit's arguments for these claims along with some objections found in the literature.

3.1 Moral Functionalism

The functionalist aspect of DMF, claim (a), seeks to give truth conditions for ethical predications, which are rooted in what Jackson and Pettit call 'folk morality'. Folk morality is "the network of moral opinions, intuitions, principles and concepts whose mastery is part and parcel of having a sense of what is right and wrong, and of being able to engage in meaningful debate about what ought to be done".[34] Folk morality consists of input clauses, internal role clauses, and output clauses. Input clauses "tell us what kinds of situations described in descriptive, non-moral terms warrant what kinds of description in ethical terms".[35] Internal role

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[33] Jackson (1992; 1998; 2001; 2003; 2017), Jackson and Pettit (1995; 1996). In the 1995 paper Jackson and Pettit use the term 'moral functionalism' to describe their view, whereas Jackson uses the term 'analytic descriptivism' in his 1998 book.
[34] Jackson 1998 pg. 130
[35] Jackson (1998) pg. 130

clauses "articulate the interconnections between matters described in ethical, normative language".[36] The output clauses "take us from ethical judgements to facts about motivation and thus behaviour".[37] For example, 'humiliating someone is usually wrong', 'right actions ought to be performed', and 'the judgment that something is bad typically involves some desire to avoid or eliminate that thing' are examples of input, internal role, and output clauses, respectively.

Currently, the tenets of folk morality are controversial, so Jackson proposes that the truth conditions for ethical predication be based on 'mature folk morality'. Mature folk morality is "where folk morality will end up after it has been exposed to debate and critical reflection".[38] Jackson recognizes that folk morality may not converge to a single mature folk morality held by the global community, instead, critical reflection and debate may lead to different groups holding different mature folk moralities. In the second case, Jackson suggests that these groups mean something different by their moral terms.[39] For the remainder of this section, 'mature folk morality' will refer to folk morality that has converged after critical reflection and debate. The complication of having multiple mature folk moralities will be set aside.

With this theoretical background in place, Jackson and Pettit proceed to give the truth conditions for ethical predications. What follows is fairly technical, so after presenting Jackson and Pettit's procedure for assigning truth conditions to ethical predications I will try to reconstruct their procedure in a less formal manner. In Jackson's words:[40]

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[36] Jackson (1998) pg. 130
[37] Jackson (1998) pg. 131
[38] Jackson (1998) pg. 133
[39] Jackson (1998) pg. 137
[40] Jackson 1998 pgs. 140-141. While this lengthy quote is taken from Jackson's work, Jackson and Pettit (1996) gives a similar formulation.

Let **M** be mature folk morality. Imagine it written out as a long conjunction with the moral predicates written in property name style. For example, 'Killing someone is typically wrong' becomes 'Killing typically has the property of being wrong'. Replace each distinct moral property term by a distinct variable to give $\mathbf{M}(x_1, x_2, \ldots)$. Then '$(\exists x_1)\ldots\mathbf{M}(x_1, \ldots)$' is the Ramsey sentence of **M**, and

$$(\exists x_1)\ldots(y_1)\ldots(\mathbf{M}(y_1, \ldots) \text{ iff } x_1 = y_1 \,\&\, x_2 = y_2 \ldots)$$

is the modified Ramsey sentence of **M** which says that there is a unique realization of **M**.

If moral functionalism is true, **M** and the modified Ramsey sentence of **M** say the same thing. For that is what holding that the ethical concepts are fixed by their place in the network of mature folk morality comes to. Fairness is what fills the fairness role; rightness is what fills the rightness role; and so on. We can now say what it is for some action A to be, say, right, as follows:

(R) A is right iff $(\exists x_1)\ldots(A \text{ has } x_r \,\&\, (y_1)\ldots(\mathbf{M}(y_1, \ldots) \text{ iff } x_1 = y_1 \,\&\, \ldots))$

Where 'x_r' replaced 'being right' in **M**. We now have our account of when A is right: it is right just if it has the property that plays the rightness role as specified by the right-hand side of (R)

Before saying more about these truth conditions, I will reconstruct Jackson and Pettit's procedure.[41] The first step is to take the conjunction of all the platitudes in mature folk morality, illustrated by the following example.[42]

(1) Humiliating someone is usually wrong ∧ when someone is in danger and you can

easily help them, typically, the right thing to do is to help them ∧ killing is usually

not justified ∧ people with a disposition to perform right actions are typically

virtuous ∧ right actions ought to be performed ∧ rights impose duties ∧ the

judgment that something is bad typically involves some desire to avoid or eliminate

that thing ∧ …

Then rewrite (1) in terms of properties and relations and replace any moral terms with variables.

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[41] This reconstruction is based on the reconstructions found in Lutz and Lenman (2018) and Streumer (2017)
[42] In what follows I will use the conjunction symbol ∧ instead of 'and'

(2) There exists properties w, r_1, j, v, r_2, b … and relations o, d … such that {the act of

humiliating someone usually has property w ∧ when someone is in danger and you

can easily help them, typically, if you help them then your action has property r_1 ∧

killing usually does not have property j ∧ people with a disposition to perform

actions with property r_1 typically have property v ∧ actions with property r are in

relation o to being performed ∧ If someone has property r_2 then other people stand

in relation d to the person with property r_2 ∧ the judgment that something has

property b typically involves some desire to avoid or eliminate that thing ∧ …}

Since Jackson is assuming mature folk morality converges, there must be unique properties and

relations playing these roles.

(3) There exists properties w, r_1, j, v, r_2, b … and relations o, d … such that { … } and

for any properties $w^*, r_1^*, j^*, v^*, r_2^*, b^*$ … and relations o^*, d^* …, { … }* holds if

and only if $w = w^*, r_1 = r_1^*$, … and $o = o^*, d = d^*$, …

Finally, the truth conditions for an ethical predication of, say, 'right' can be given as follows.

(R) An action A is right if and only if there exists properties w, r_1, j, v, r_2, b … and

relations o, d … such that A possesses r_1 and {the act of humiliating someone

usually has property w ∧ when someone is in danger and you can easily help them,

typically, if you help them then your action has property r_1 ∧ killing usually does

not have property j ∧ people with a disposition to perform actions with property r_1

typically have property v ∧ actions with property r_1 are in relation o to being

performed ∧ If someone has property r_2 then other people stand in relation d to the

person with property r_2 ∧ the judgment that something has property b typically

involves some desire to avoid or eliminate that thing ∧ …} (with a uniqueness

clause as in (3))

Again, the intuitive idea behind Jackson and Pettit's approach is to use the whole of our

critically developed moral intuitions and principles to provide conditions for when an ethical

predicate applies to a state of affairs. This procedure does not try to provide truth conditions of

ethical terms in isolation, instead, the approach respects the holistic nature of our competence

with interdefinable ethical terms. Furthermore, these truth conditions are purely descriptive as

the right hand of (R) contains no normative terms. It is for this reason that Jackson holds that he

has provided an analysis of a moral term like 'right'. What moral functionalism remains silent on

is the nature of the properties filling the roles in mature folk morality. As Jackson and Pettit say,

"For all that moral functionalism says, it might be that the properties whose descriptively

specifiable interconnections make it the case, according to moral functionalism, that they are the

evaluative properties are not themselves descriptive properties".[43] Jackson and Pettit do,

however, believe that evaluative properties are descriptive properties and their argument for this

claim will be the topic of the next section.

3.2 Supervenience and Descriptive Properties.

As already noted, moral functionalism leaves open whether the properties that satisfy the

roles picked out by mature folk morality are *sui generis* evaluative properties or are descriptive

properties. Jackson and Pettit think they have an argument that provides reason to believe that

such properties are descriptive properties. The argument starts with the widely accepted thesis

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[43] Jackson and Pettit (1996)

that moral properties supervene on descriptive properties. I will explain what this claim means, but in order to understand it I need to provide a brief background on possible worlds.

We can easily conceive of alternative ways courses of actions or events could have panned out. For example, if a giant meteor did not hit the earth 66 million years ago the dinosaurs would not have gone extinct at the time they did. This deviation from what actually happened would have changed the way the world is, even if on the cosmic scale only minutely. We can imagine much more drastic changes, however. The laws of physics could be different than they are or there could be no material world at all, only unembodied Cartesian minds. A possible world, then, is a complete way the world *could* be. Using the notion of possible worlds, necessity, possibility, and impossibility can be defined. The intuitive idea behind necessity is that something is necessary if it must be the case, such as four being the sum of two and two. With the idea of possible worlds, we can say something is necessary if it holds (i.e. is true) in all possible worlds. Something is possible if it holds in at least one possible world, and something is impossible if it holds in no possible world.

Before presenting Jackson and Pettit's argument for the reduction of ethical properties to descriptive properties, I want to provide what I hope to be a more digestible, but parallel argument for the reduction of the property of being tall to facts about individual heights.[44] Letting *w* be some possible world, tallness supervenes on individual heights in the following sense.[45]

(R)   For all w and w*, if w and w* are exactly alike in the distribution of particular heights, then they are exactly alike in the distribution of tallness

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[44] Be tall can be interpreted as being taller that some percentage of people.
[45] Jackson (2001)

Jackson's reduction is given as follows.[46]

> Consider any tall person P_1. They must have some particular height or other, as it is impossible to be tall without having some particular height (I'd say some particular, fully determinate height, but that is controversial). Let "x is H_1" be the open sentence that ascribes that height and in addition gives the distribution of heights elsewhere in that person's world (read so as to include that this distribution is complete). It must then be the case that "x is H_1" entails "x is tall". For suppose that P is a person satisfying "x is H_1". There are two cases. The first is where P is in the same world as P_1. In this case, P must be tall, as anyone the same height as a tall world-mate is tall. The second case is where P is in a different world from P_1. In this case also P is tall. For otherwise there would be two worlds exactly alike in the distribution of particular heights but differing in the distribution of tallness, in violation of (R). Now consider any other tall person P_2. With H_2 specified as for H_1 above but with "2" for "l", we get the result that "x is H_2" entails "x is tall". From which it follows that "x is H_1 or H_2" entails "x is tall". Repeating the process for every tall person in logical space, we get "x is H_1 or H_2 or H_3 …" entails "x is tall". But, as we included every tall person in logical space, the entailment must also run the other way. We have thus derived the logical equivalence of the infinite disjunctive open sentence "x is H_1 or H_2 or …" with "x is tall".

> This is not a surprising result. In effect we have shown that

> x is tall iff {(x is 6' & [P_1 is 6' and P_2 is 6'6" and …]} or ((x is 7' & [P_1 is 6' and P_2 is 6'6" and …]} or { (x is 8' & [P_1 is 9' and P_2 is 6'6" and …]} or ...

> is necessarily true (and *a priori*) …

Jackson has actually relied on two supervenience theses: the interworld supervenience thesis (R), which he references explicitly, and an intra-world supervenience thesis[47] which he mentions when he says, "…anyone the same height as a tall world-mate is tall".

There is an analogous supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive. Letting w be a possible world again, the inter-world supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive is the following thesis:[48]

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[46] Jackson (2001)

[47] An intra-world supervenience thesis would looks something like 'For all people in a given world, if they are exactly alike in their heights, then they are exactly alike in their tallness'.

[48] Jackson 1998 pg. 119

(S)   For all w and w^*, if w and w^* are exactly alike descriptively then they are exactly alike

ethically.

This captures the intuitive idea that in order for there to be an ethical difference in a situation

there needs to be some descriptive difference. The idea that this thesis holds for all possible

worlds, if it does, means that it is not just a peculiarity of the actual world that descriptively alike

situations are ethically alike, but a relation that holds necessarily. Jackson does not defend (S),

but he does believe that it is *a priori* knowable.[49]

Jackson also does not say much about the precise difference between ethical terms and

descriptive terms, instead, trusting his audience to share his intuition that there is a worthwhile

distinction to be made. He recognizes that terms like 'honest' and 'courageous' may have both

descriptive and ethical content but allows these "thick" moral terms to be classified as ethical.

Furthermore, descriptive terms are not meant to reflect any commitment on Jackson's behalf that

physical nature is the only possible subvening base. Jackson admits the possibility of worlds with

Cartesian mental states, for example, in which case the supervenience relation would still hold.

The argument for ethical naturalism from supervenience will now be presented using

ethical predicates.[50]

> Consider any right action R_1. It must have some particular descriptive nature or other, as
> it is impossible to be right without having some descriptive nature or other. Let "x is D_1"
> be the open sentence that ascribes that nature and also fully specifies descriptive nature
> elsewhere in R_1's world. It must then be the case that "x is D_1" entails ''x is right". For
> suppose that R is an act satisfying "x is D_1". There are two cases. The first is where R is
> in the same world as R_1. In this case, R must be right, as any act descriptively the same as
> a right world-mate is right. The second case is where R is in a different world from R_1. In

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[49] For a defense of ethical supervenience see Smith (2004)
[50] Jackson presents multiple versions of this argument. Jackson (1998) gives the argument in terms of ethical sentences, whereas Jackson (2001, 2003) gives the argument in terms of ethical predicates. The following quote is from Jackson (2001).

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this case also R is right. For otherwise there would be two worlds exactly alike descriptively but differing in the distribution of rightness, in violation of (S). Now consider any other right act R_2. With D_2 specified as for D_1 above but with "2" for "1", we get the result that "x is D_2" entails "x is right". From which it follows that "x is D_1 or D_2" entails "x is right". Repeating the process for every right act in logical space, we get "x is D_1 or D_2 or D_3 . . ." entails "x is right". But, as we included every right act in logical space, the entailment must also run the other way. We have thus derived the logical equivalence of the infinite disjunctive open sentence "x is D_1 or D_2 or …" with "x is right".

This argument, again, relies on both an inter-world and intra-world supervenience claim and can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other ethical predicates.

Since 'x is right' if and only if 'x is $\mathcal{D}$',[51] there is a descriptive predicate that is necessarily coextensive with every ethical predicate. The extension of a referential expression is the set of objects, properties, etc. referred to by the expression. For terms to be co-extensive means that they have the same extension, and for terms to be necessarily co-extensive means they have the same extension across all possible worlds. Jackson takes the necessary co-extension of ethical and descriptive predicates to be a "strong but not apodictic" reason to hold that ethical properties are descriptive properties.[52]

3.3 Putting Things Together

Jackson and Pettit hold that what fits the bill for moral functionalism are descriptive properties ascribed by predicates like $\mathcal{D}$. This raises a question. Are moral properties those which fit the bill at a given possible world, "realizer properties" in philosophy of mind jargon, or are they the property of being the property that fits the bill which is something all realizer properties share, called the "role property"? Jackson seems to change his position on the answer to this question. In *From Metaphysics to Ethics* he suggests that moral properties are realizer properties

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[51] For the sake of convenience, I have shortened "x is D_1 or D_2 or …" to 'x is $\mathcal{D}$'.
[52] Jackson 2017 (201)

because, continuing with the example of rightness, "what we should aim at is not doing what is right *qua* what is right".[53] Instead, "I should rescue someone from a fire because if I don't they will die, not because that is the right thing to do".[54] More recently, in *In Defense of Reduction in Ethics* Jackson suggests that moral properties are role properties because "that's the property shared by all right acts across logical space".[55] This second view seems to be more consistent with Jackson's argument for moral properties being descriptive properties. This is because $\mathcal{D}$ is the disjunction of all right acts across all possible worlds, so unless what fits the bill does not vary from one possible world to another, $\mathcal{D}$ would seem to ascribe the role property.

If we now put claims (a) and (b) from the beginning of Section 3 together, we get the following statement: an ethical predicate applies to a state of affairs if and only if the state of affairs possesses the property that satisfies the functional role specified by the system of mature folk morality for that predicate, and the properties that satisfy these roles are descriptive role properties ascribed by predicates like $\mathcal{D}$. This gives us a procedure for pairing off moral predicates with descriptive properties and provides truth conditions for ethical predications that depend on the possession of said descriptive properties. Furthermore, the truth conditions depend on property possession and the identification of moral properties is an *a posteriori* matter according to moral functionalism.[56] Hence, DMF claims that moral truth is concerned with matters of fact as the truth conditions are synthetic and the propositions are *a posteriori* knowable.

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[53] Jackson (1998) pg. 141
[54] Jackson (1998) pg. 141
[55] Jackson (2017)
[56] Jackson (1998) pg. 151

3.4 What about Moore?

Jackson interprets Moore's challenge to his position differently than I presented the challenge in Section 2. According to Jackson, Moore is committed to "an *inadequacy* claim: what is left of language after we cull the ethical terms is in principle inadequate to the task of ascribing the properties we ascribe using the ethical terms".[57] But Jackson thinks that by constructing $\mathcal{D}$, he has done just what Moore said was not achievable.

Jackson also thinks that Moore would object to moral functionalism on the grounds that "no matter how much information of a purely descriptive kind I have, and no matter how carefully I have digested it and put it all together, it is still open to me to go either way on such questions as: Is *A* good? Is *A* what I ought to do? And, Is *A* right?"[58] Jackson thinks Moore's objection holds no weight for two reasons. The first reason is that the identification of which descriptive properties fit the bill for moral functionalism are *a posteriori*. So, say, an action is right if it maximizes happiness. This statement comes out as true, not because of *a priori* reasoning, but because the communities of the future that possess mature folk morality have gone out and looked to see which property matches the template provided by mature folk morality. The second reason that Jackson thinks Moore's complaint does not carry much weight is because the tenants of folk morality are still very much under debate. According to Jackson, once we have mature folk morality and have identified the properties that fill the roles in mature folk morality, it will no longer be open for us to wonder whether something is good, for example.

I will return to the topic of Moore's challenges in the discussion of some of the literature directly responding to Jackson and Pettit, but suffice it to say that Jackson seems to think that he

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[57] Jackson (1998) pg. 121
[58] Jackson (1998) pg. 150

has dispensed with Moore's objection. For reasons that will become evident, I am not sure if his answer is entirely satisfactory. The next section will take a critical look at DMF, focusing on the functionalist aspects of the theory.

4. Trouble with Moral Functionalism

4.1 Regress and Circularity[59]

The first objection to moral functionalism that I want to discuss concerns the use of "mature folk morality". Mature folk morality is used to specify the truth conditions for ethical propositions. Recall the formula proposed by moral functionalism for providing the truth conditions for a predication of, say 'is good'.

(MF)[(1a)] S is good $\iff$ S has the property g that satisfies the goodness role in mature folk morality.

Under Jackson's construction, mature folk morality is not an arbitrary location along the trajectory of folk morality, rather, it is the version of folk morality delivered after some procedure has been completed. But, again, we do not want to arbitrarily choose a procedure for developing folk morality, we want the procedure that is most reasonable, rational, best, etc. These are normative notions, and while Jackson only applied functionalism to moral terms, it seems that his reductive supervenience considerations would suggest that he would want to tell a functionalist story for other normative notions, including 'most reasonable', 'rational', 'best', etc. This, however, generates either a regress or becomes circular.

To see the regress, let's begin by reformulating (MF)[(1a)].

(MF)[(1b)] S is good $\iff$ S has the property g that satisfies the goodness role in the version of folk morality reached after the most reasonable reflection.

All I have done is unpack 'mature folk morality' as 'version of folk morality reached after the most reasonable reflection'. The tenets of our current folk reasonableness theory for reaching mature folk morality seem just as controversial as the tenets of the current form of folk morality.

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[59] I have adapted an infinite regress objection from Streumer (2017) and a circularity objection from Yablo (2000)

In fact, the reason current folk morality is so contentious seems to be, in a large part, because we have not settled on the most reasonable method for reaching mature folk morality. If Jackson is motivated to use mature folk morality because of the controversy in the current version of folk morality, then it seems that he should posit a mature version of reasonableness theory to specify the truth conditions of 'most reasonable'.

This would look like the following.

(MF)[(2a)] S is good $\Longleftrightarrow$ S has the property g that satisfies the goodness role in the version of folk morality reached after reflection with property r, where r is the property that satisfies the reasonableness role in mature reasonableness theory.

But mature reasonableness theory cannot be an arbitrary version of folk reasonableness theory. It needs to be the version of folk reasonableness theory reached after we have performed reflection that is most reasonable, rational, best, etc. This means we need another standard of 'most reasonable', call it 'most reasonable[(2)]' to measure which theory of reasonableness is most reasonable.

(MF)[(2b)] S is good $\Longleftrightarrow$ S has the property g that satisfies the goodness role in the version of folk morality reached after reflection with property r, where r is the property that satisfies the reasonableness role in the version of reasonableness theory reached after 'most reasonable[(2)]' reflection.

This is the beginning of an infinite regress. The truth conditions for a moral statement are specified using mature folk morality. What counts as mature folk morality is specified using mature folk reasonableness theory. What counts as mature folk reasonableness theory is specified using mature folk reasonableness theory[(2)], and so on.

This objection shows we never get the truth conditions for moral statements. What fixes the truth conditions keeps getting pushed back to successive levels of mature theories of reasonableness. Part of what generated this regress was that a new standard of reasonableness was used to try to fix the truth conditions of the priori theory of folk reasonableness. What if we only used one standard of reasonableness? That is to say, what if the standard of reasonableness used to reach mature folk morality is the standard of reasonableness used to reach mature reasonableness theory? This would look like the following.

(MF)$^{(2c)}$ S is good $\Longleftrightarrow$ S has the property g that satisfies the goodness role in the version of folk morality reached after reflection with property r, where r is the property that satisfies the reasonableness role in the version of reasonableness theory reached after reflection with property r.

In this case the truth conditions for moral propositions are not specified because what is supposed to fix the template that gives these truth conditions is specified in a circular manner. What fixes the truth conditions for reasonableness is the very same standard of reasonableness.

This regress or circularity seems to undermine Jackson's response to Moore's open question challenge. Jackson thinks that given enough descriptive information moral matters will be settled. There will be no openness to moral questions. But the regress and circularity objection show that if moral functionalism appeals to mature folk theories of normative concepts like reasonableness, then we never get a set of descriptive truth conditions for moral statements. If we introduce irreducibly normative terms to specify moral truth conditions then it seems that we have admitted that moral truths are not, in principle, *a priori* deducible from descriptive information alone, but this was supposed to be one of the most important payoffs of Jackson's

moral functionalism. It seems that Jackson might respond by doing away with *mature* versions of reasonableness or moral theory. This is what we will look at next.

4.2 Immaturity, Disagreement, Reference-Fixing, and the Input Clauses

To get a sense of what functionalism without maturity would look like, I think we can draw on what Jackson says about the possibility of there being multiple mature versions of folk morality. In Section 3.1 I mentioned that Jackson said that if different groups hold different mature versions of folk morality then they would mean something different by their moral terms.[60] It seems that if we drop the notion of a *mature* theory of folk morality, then perhaps we could say that if different groups hold different folk theories of morality, then they simply mean something different by their moral terms. This does not seem to square well with the intuition that when we say, 'Slavery is wrong' today we are truly disagreeing with communities in the past who said, 'Slavery is permissible'. It does not seem that we are merely talking past each other.

Jackson has responded to this challenge by appealing to the distinction drawn in Section 3.3 between the realizer property and the role property. Jackson thinks that when we engage in moral debate, we are arguing "over which property has the property of playing the role we give being right when we engage in moral theory".[61] That is to say, we are not arguing that one asserted realizer property is another asserted realizer property, which would mean that we are talking past each other. We are arguing about which property satisfies the template of folk theory for the relevant subject matter. To engage in moral debate, then, is to accept a shared template of folk moral theory with an interlocutor.

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[60] Here I am referring to Jackson (1998) pg. 137. Jackson reiterates this position in Jackson (2010)
[61] Jackson (2017)

This raises a question that I do not think Jackson fully addresses. What aspects of folk moral theory need to be shared in order to engage in genuine moral debate? From what Jackson has said, it seems that you need to agree on quite a lot in order to engage in genuine moral debate. Recall that folk morality includes input clauses that are supposed to "tell us what kinds of situations described in descriptive, non-moral terms warrant what kinds of description in ethical terms". This means we must agree to substantial moral statements, like "pain is bad" and "If an act is an intentional killing, then normally it is wrong"[62] to engage in moral debate. While I agree that you may not get very far in a debate with a person who believes that pain is intrinsically good, it nonetheless seems that if the person agrees on the internal role, and perhaps a few of the output clauses of folk moral theory, then they would still be able to engage in some level of meaningful moral debate. Their belief that pain is intrinsically good is simply incorrect. Requiring interlocutors to assent to the substantive input clauses excludes those with deviant moral judgments from genuine moral debate, even when they share our formal understanding of the interconnections between moral terms and their relation to motivation.

I now want to return to the question of whether we can look to folk moral theory, or folk reasonableness theory, to establish descriptive truth conditions for moral propositions. Folk theory can be used, but if input clauses are included in folk theory, then we admit that interlocutors who agree on the internal role clauses of morality but differ in their acceptance of input clauses are simply talking past each other. The input clauses of folk morality can be weakened so that they are generally accepted, but this raises its own problems for moral functionalism. As Schroeter and Schroeter point out, "[O]ur intuitions about what's required for competence with evaluative terms push us towards a very weak folk theoretical template, while

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[62] Jackson (1998) pg. 130

our intuitions about the reference of such terms require a much richer template".[63] The concern, then, is that when we make genuine moral debate more inclusive, we weaken folk morality's ability to determine the reference of moral terms. In the limit where all that is required for two speakers to be able to engage in meaningful moral debate is to accept internal role clauses, it seems that no reference whatsoever can be fixed.

Perhaps we are willing to accept the incorporation of enough substantive input clauses to fix the reference of moral terms, even if it goes against our intuitions about what counts as genuine moral debate. This raises yet another concern. Are the input clauses supposed to be synthetic or analytic? If they are synthetic, and *a posteriori*, then the input clauses involve genuine discoveries about the world beyond our concepts. These discoveries were not made by using the template of folk morality to go and look to see what properties fit the bill specified by folk morality, because the input clauses are supposed to partially constitute folk morality. If this is the case then there is a way to know synthetic moral truth independently of the moral functionalist account, so why not simply allow all moral truth to be known this way? If the input clauses are an example of the synthetic *a priori* then, again, there is a way to know moral truth that does not rely on the functionalist model. A similar question can be raised if the input clauses are supposed to be analytic. Moore's challenge aside, if you are sympathetic to the point made by Schroeter and Schroeter, then it seems that by the time enough input clauses have been incorporated into folk morality to fix the reference of moral terms there will be little need for moral properties to explain moral truth. In this case there is a way moral truth can be true simply in virtue of concepts, so why only go part of the way with analyticity?

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[63] Schroeter and Schroeter (2009)

The objections put forth so far against moral functionalism are not "knock-down" arguments, but I do think they give us a reason to have reservations about its plausibility. To give a short recap of the objections, recall that the notion of *mature* folk morality led to regress or circularity. The regress and circularity can be avoided if irreducibly normative notions are incorporated into the functionalist account of some normative terms, but this undermines one of the central alleged payoffs of moral functionalism, as moral functionalism was supposed to deliver purely descriptive truth conditions. To try to retain this payoff we looked at using immature versions of folk reasonableness and moral theory. While this retains descriptive truth conditions it comes at the cost of giving up intuitions about what level of agreement is required for genuine moral debate. What challenged this intuition was the requirement that interlocutors accept substantive input clauses to count as genuinely arguing. This problem may seem to be mitigated if we look to very widely accepted input clauses, but when we do this, we lose the ability to fix the reference of moral terms. Lastly, we looked at what it would mean to bite the bullet and include enough input clauses to fix the reference of moral terms. This raised the question of why we were using moral functionalism in the first place. In the next section we will turn away from functionalism and look at a view that does not use moral properties to account for certain substantive moral truths.

5. Moral Concept Essentialism

Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau (C&SL) have taken up the other prong of

Hume's Fork in their paper *The Moral Fixed Points: New Directions for Moral Nonnaturalism*

by arguing that ethical truths do not state matters of fact, but rather concern relations of ideas.[64]

The central claim made by C&SL is that there is a set of substantive moral propositions, the

"moral fixed points", that are true in virtue of the essences of the concepts that constitute the

propositions. Since it is the essences of moral concepts that account for the truth of these

propositions, I will call the position held by C&SL 'moral concept essentialism' (MCE). Cuneo

and Shafer-Landau argue that we should accept MCE because of the thesis' explanatory power

and ability to respond to common objections to moral realism. After showing how MCE explains

some of our intuitions about moral propositions and sidesteps many of the challenges to moral

realism, I will present three objections to MCE. I will argue that C&SL can respond to these

objections, but at the cost of positing brute necessary connections between distinct essences.

This, I believe, counts significantly against the explanatory power of their view.

5.1 The View and its Payoffs

Moral concept essentialism is the view that there are substantive conceptual moral truths,

called the "moral fixed points". Cuneo and Shafer-Landau give ten examples of moral fixed

points that they have credited themselves "with enough conceptual mastery to confidently affirm

the truth of these propositions".[65] I will present three of the moral fixed points that seem

representative of the ten.[66]

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[64] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014)

[65] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 405

[66] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 405 The moral fixed points are indexed to "beings like us" in "worlds like ours" to "protect against bizarre possibilities in which there may be nothing at all (say) wrong with recreational slaughter…Imagine a world, for instance, in which, upon being killed, we spontaneously regenerate after a short period of time. Perhaps being killed in such circumstances is not even pro tanto wrong" Cuneo and Shafer-Landua (2014) pg. 405 fn. 15

(MFP1)   For beings like us, in a world like ours, it is *pro tanto* wrong to engage in the

recreational slaughter of a fellow person.

(MFP2)   For beings like us, in a world like ours, 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.

(MFP3)   For beings like us, in a world like ours, if acting justly is costless, then, *ceteris*

paribus, one should act justly.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau believe that the moral fixed points are not only conceptual truths, but

that they "constitute the boundaries" of a "minimally eccentric moral system", where a

minimally eccentric moral system is a "reasonably comprehensive and consistent body of moral

propositions that apply to beings like us in a world such as ours".[67] In setting the boundaries of a

minimally eccentric moral system the fixed points are supposed to distinguish a moral system

from other normative systems.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau rely on what they call the "traditional view" of concepts, to

explain how the moral fixed points are conceptual truths.[68] According to the traditional view,

concepts bear the following four characteristics.

(C1)   Concepts are "abstract, sharable, mind-independent ways of thinking about objects

and their properties".[69]

(C2)   Concepts are "the building blocks or sub-components of propositions".[70]

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[67] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pgs. 404, 406

[68] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 409 Cuneo and Shafer-Landau attribute the traditional view of concepts to philosophers such as Aristotle and Frege.

[69] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 409 Abstract objects are extra-mental, extra-physical, and causally inert. Being abstract, concepts are not located in physical brains or in some way dependent on our use of them. The most obvious examples of concepts are predicative ones, such as "is red" or "is just", but C&SL suggest that perhaps demonstratives such as 'there' and 'that' and indexicals such as 'here' and 'now' are also concepts.

[70] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 409-410 In footnote 3 I said that propositions were whatever turned out to be the primary truth bearers. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau reserve the term 'proposition' for a specific type of truth-bearer, namely, a truth-bearer that is at least partly abstract. I say partly, because SL&C think that their view is compatible with propositions containing facts.

(C3)   Concepts are "*referential devices* or *ways of getting things in the mind* that enable

thinkers to refer to things such as objects and properties".[71]

(C4)   Concepts have essences.[72]

Using this machinery, a proposition 'x is F' is a conceptual truth if it "belongs to the essence of

'F' that, necessarily, anything that satisfies 'x' also satisfies 'F'".[73] Call this condition (CT). The

first moral fixed point, MFP1, is a conceptual truth in virtue of (CT), if it belongs to the essence

of 'wrong' that, necessarily, anything that satisfies 'recreational slaughter of a fellow person'

also satisfies 'wrong'. There is much more to be said about (CT) and C&SL's use of the moral

fixed points to distinguish a moral system from other normative systems, as mentioned in the

previous paragraph. I will discuss these claims at further lengths in the following sections, but

for now let's look at the payoffs of treating the moral fixed points as conceptual truths.

If the moral fixed points are conceptual truths, then C&SL think it explains four features

that might plausibly be attributed to the moral fixed points: necessity[74], ability to evoke

bewilderment when denied, "framework status", and *a priori* knowability.[75] If the moral fixed

points are conceptual truths, then this would explain their air of necessity, for they would be

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[71] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 410 Concepts do not need to apply to actual entities, but they at least purport to apply to entities.

[72] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 410 Cuneo and Shafer-Landau do not give an account of essences, but I take it that an essence is, roughly, the set of features of an entity that make it what it is. Without these essential features, an entity loses its identity. Because concepts have essences, they are different than words. As Cuneo and Shafer-Landau put it, "The concept 'being wrong,' for example, could not be the concept it is if it were not about wrongness; it belongs to the essence of the concept that it applies to exactly those things that are wrong (if any such things there be). The word "wrong," by contrast, could be the word it is even if it were not about wrongness" (Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 410)

[73] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 410

[74] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau seem to be using 'necessity' in a different sense than I introduced when discussing DMF. The moral truths are not true in *all* possible worlds as they are indexed to "words like ours", so perhaps C&SL mean that the moral truths are necessary in the sense that they are accessible from the actual world. For a world to be accessible from another world is, roughly, for there to be some set of criteria that relates the two worlds, such as having the same set of physical laws, containing sentient beings, or being logically possible.

[75] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 407-408

conceptually necessary.[76] For those competent with the concepts,[77] C&SL suggest that denying that killing people just for fun is wrong would be met with bafflement. Part of this bafflement might be because the concepts are simply being misused. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau use the term "framework status" to describe propositions that set the boundaries of a subject matter. To the extent that morality has distinguishable boundaries, C&SL suggest that the moral fixed points would help set these boundaries. Finally, if the moral fixed points are conceptual truths, then this would give us reason to believe they are *a priori* knowable.

Taking the moral fixed points to be conceptual truths does more than just explain the four features mentioned, it allows C&SL to respond to several objections leveled against moral realism. For those sympathetic to moral realism, this would provide an additional reason to find MCE an attractive position. The first objection to moral realism that C&SL think MCE has the resources to respond to is the objection from moral disagreement.[78] The objection rests on the observation that there is widespread and persistent moral disagreement. Those who develop the objection from disagreement suggest that this observation in some way undermines our confidence in there being true moral propositions, or at least objectively true moral propositions. In response to this objection, C&SL note that the type of disagreement that is relevant to the objection is disagreement among those competent with moral concepts. Those fully competent with moral concepts, however, will recognize that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths. Widespread and persistent moral disagreement can be explained, according to C&SL, by

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[76] As opposed to metaphysical, logical, or nomic necessity.
[77] C&SL think that part of being competent with moral concepts is recognizing that they apply universally, so if someone believes that moral terms fail to apply to an "out group", then they are not competent with moral terms (Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 413). The are many examples of people not being bewildered by moral atrocities towards some "out group", but according to C&SL, this is in part, because they are not competent with moral concepts.
[78] For a concise version of the argument from disagreement see Mackie (1977) pgs. 36-38

conceptual deficiencies that "consist in or [are] accompanied by…[the]…cumulative effect of

bias, prejudice, various kinds of irrationality, factual ignorance, or limited imagination".[79]

Moral disagreement is not the only argument against moral realism that has its basis in

empirical observations. There are so called "evolutionary debunking" arguments that attempt to

show that the origin of our moral beliefs undermines our confidence in our moral beliefs

counting as moral knowledge.[80] Specifically, C&SL have in mind arguments of the following

form.[81]

> 1. There are no contentful conceptual constraints on what can count as a moral norm or a
> moral system; there is an indefinitely large set of incompatible moral systems, each of
> which, as a matter of conceptual possibility, may be true.
> 2. Evolutionary forces have caused us to endorse only a small subset of all such systems.
> 3. If moral nonnaturalism is true, then there is a uniquely correct moral system of stance-
> independent moral truths.
> 4. Given the vast range of conceptually possible moral systems, the odds that
> evolutionary forces have pushed us to endorse the uniquely correct moral system of
> stance-independent moral truths are extremely low.
> 5. Such odds entail that if moral nonnaturalism is true, then it would be a remarkable
> coincidence were our moral beliefs largely on target.

If MCE is true, then the first premise of this argument is false. There are contentful conceptual

constraints on what counts as a moral system; therefore, the argument does not show that it is a

"remarkable coincidence" that our moral beliefs track moral truth.

The last payoff of MCE that C&SL showcase is the view's ability to respond to charges

that nonnaturalism, the view that there is a *sui generis* moral reality, must be committed to brute

supervenience connections between descriptive properties and moral properties. Cuneo and

Shafer-Landau do not think this connection would be brute because it would hold of conceptual

necessity. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau also note that MCE is compatible with moral naturalism,

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[79] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 424
[80] For an example of an evolutionary debunking argument see Street (2006).
[81] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 426

the view that moral properties are natural properties, in which case the charge of positing a brute

metaphysical connection between properties in such radically distinct categories no longer

applies. Moral properties just are natural properties, so they would trivially supervene on natural

properties.[82]

   While C&SL have outlined a lot of the payoffs of MCE, they do not claim to have

answered all the challenges to moral realism as they admit they have not defended the

"traditional view" of concepts nor given an account of conceptual knowledge. Furthermore, they

have not answered the perennial question "Why be moral?" That said, if MCE is correct, then it

does answer a few of the prominent objections to moral realism and explain why some moral

truths seem necessary and *a priori*. In the following sections I will discuss some of the criticisms

of MCE and how these criticisms count against C&SL's case for the explanatory power of MCE.

5.2 The Trouble with Moral Fixed Points having Framework Status

   Cuneo and Shafer-Landau suggest that in order to be a moral system for beings like us in

a world like ours, a normative system must include specific moral fixed points. The moral fixed

points set the boundaries of the subject matter of morality, giving them "framework status".

What I find concerning about C&SL's proposal is that it is in tension with other intuitions about

what counts as a moral system. The intuitions I have in mind are that a moral system is

categorical and authoritative. For a normative system to be categorical is for it to apply to agents

regardless of their ends.[83] Systems of etiquette are also categorical in this way,[84] but it seems that

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[82] There are two other "payoffs" that I think are worth noting. The first is that MCE does not need to posit any "queer" properties of the kind Mackie seems to have had in mind when he attacked moral realism (Mackie (1977) pgs. 38-42). There need not be any "objective values" out there in the world or "intrinsically prescriptive entities" that Mackie thought our moral judgments presuppose. The second payoff is that MCE seems to sidestep Moore's open question challenge, as the view does not suppose that it is the meaning of the concepts that determines their truth, rather the essences of their concepts. More will be said about C&SL's appeal to essences once we look at some of the objections to MCE.
[83] This terminology comes from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*
[84] Foot (1972)

we want something extra to distinguish a moral system from systems of etiquette. For a normative system to have moral authority is for it to have reasons of "genuine deliberative weight".[85] You really ought to give priority to moral considerations.

Moral authority and categorical status seem to be concepts in their own right, but if this is the case, then it seems that there needs to be some special connection between these concepts and the normative system picked out by the moral fixed points if C&SL want to hold that a moral system is authoritative. To see this, suppose that there are two action-guiding normative systems that are categorical and authoritative, but have different fixed points. Call the first system **MS** and the second system **MS***. Suppose **MS** includes (MFP1), 'For beings like us, in a world like ours, it is *pro tanto* wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person', and suppose **MS*** includes (MFP1)*, 'For beings like us, in a world like ours, it is *pro tanto* right to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person'. If both systems are categorical, then an agent cannot rid themselves of the norms imposed by (MFP1) and (MFP1)*, but if both are authoritative then (MFP1) and (MFP1)* both are norms of genuine deliberative weight that an agent really ought to take into consideration. This seems to undermine the authority of (MFP1) and (MFP1)* because the deliberative weights of the two norms contradict each other.[86] It seems that similar pairs of fixed points could be constructed so that **MS** and **MS*** completely contradict each other, which would reduce **MS** and **MS*** to something akin to systems of etiquette, in the sense that the systems apply categorically but do not have the overriding authority of a moral system to distinguish them from etiquette.

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[85] Joyce, Wilson, and Sterelny (2005) pg. 62

[86] Here I am assuming that for something to have genuine deliberative weight it must stand above other considerations in some overriding manner. An agent can obviously not have an overriding reason to both kill people for fun and not kill people for fun, so this contradiction suggests that there is not, in fact, an overriding and categorical reason to pursue either course of action.

As I already mentioned, C&SL could avoid this conclusion if they suggest that there is some special connection between the concepts of authority and categoricity that seem built into moral concepts like 'wrong', 'right', 'ought', etc. and the descriptive concepts like 'recreational slaughter of a fellow person'. I say that this connection seems "special" because the concepts 'authority' and 'categorical' do not seem to contain or imply anything about what action-guiding normative systems are categorical and authoritative. I will postpone a discussion of this connection until I have mentioned all three objections to MCE, as I think this alleged connection does all the work in countering these objections.

5.3 The Trouble with "worlds like ours" and "beings like us"

David Copp has taken issue with the "worlds like ours" and "beings like us" qualifiers in the moral fixed points.[87] He notes that there are two different readings of these phrases, one indexical and one descriptive. Under the indexical interpretation, the qualifications "worlds like ours" and "beings like us" is meant to index the moral fixed points to worlds similar to the actual world. Under the descriptive interpretation the "worlds like ours" and "beings like us" is meant to provide a description of worlds like ours and beings like us.

Let's start by looking at the indexical interpretation. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's motivation for introducing the "worlds like ours" and "beings like us" qualifier was to protect against radically different possible worlds in which the fixed points might not be conceptual truths.[88] Let's say that worlds in which the unqualified (MFP1) is true form a set called $\mathbb{W}$. The problem with the indexical interpretation, then, is that it is not a conceptual truth that the actual

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[87] Copp (2018) pgs. 107-111
[88] For example, (MFP1) might turn out to be false in a world where there is an evil and powerful god who will kill thousands unless one person performs an act of recreational slaughter. Or, as C&SL already noted, a world in which people quickly regenerate after being killed.

world is one of the worlds in $\mathbb{W}$. If (MFP1) is true, under the indexical interpretation, then this would mean that there are substantive, conceptual truths about what world is the actual world.[89] Our concepts do not seem to inform us about contingent facts, so it seems implausible to claim that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths.[90]

Perhaps C&SL intended for "worlds like ours" and "beings like us" to be interpreted descriptively. In this case the qualifying clauses are meant stand for a description of worlds like ours with beings like us. Such a description would be a proposition that specified the morally relevant situations in which the moral fixed points are true. So for (MFP1), there would be a proposition that specified all the circumstances in which recreational slaughter of people is wrong. If this is to be a conceptual truth according to (CT), then this descriptive information would have to belong to the essence of 'wrong', but as Copp observes, "the concept of wrongness does not encode such a theory".[91]

5.4 The Trouble with Moral Properties

Copp has raised another objection to MCE by arguing that the view is committed to the existence of moral properties as a matter of conceptual necessity, which he finds very implausible. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau make it clear that they think MCE is not committed to the existence of any moral properties as they say of (MFP1) that its "truth does not itself imply that

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[89] Such as there not being an evil god who will only spare the lives of thousands unless someone performs an act of recreational slaughter.

[90] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau anticipate this objection and respond by appealing to the "mediate" essence of a moral concept like 'wrong'. Fine (1995) draws a distinction between the "immediate" and "mediate" essence of a concept. The immediate essence follows directly from something's essence, whereas the mediate essence is subject to chaining. To use Fine's example, it belongs the "immediate nature, or essence, of singleton Socrates [the set containing only Socrates] to contain Socrates and of the immediate nature of Socrates to be a man, but it is only of the mediate nature of singleton Socrates to contain something that is a man". Cuneo and Shafer-Landau argue that it belongs to the mediate essence of 'wrong' that it contains information about beings like us in a world like ours. This response does not seem to address Copp's objection as even if information about beings like us in a world like ours is contained in the mediate essence of 'wrong', it is not a conceptual truth that the actual world is such that it satisfies whatever description is found in the essence of 'wrong' (Copp 2018 pg. 109-110).

[91] Copp (2018) pg. 111

there is a property of wrongness, let alone that such a property exists as a matter of conceptual

necessity".[92] Copp has challenged C&SL on this by trying to show that moral properties are

required for a proposition of the form 'x is F' to be a conceptual truth.

To see why Copp is skeptical of C&SL's assertion that MCE does not require moral

properties, consider C&SL's statement that "it belongs to the essence of the concept [wrong] that

it applies to exactly those things that are wrong (if any such things there be)".[93] Copp proposes

that this statement should be interpreted as meaning that "for any property P, if it is represented

by a concept, CP, then it is of the essence of CP that if anything has P, then CP applies to it as

well".[94] This interpretation avoids what Copp views as an implausible reading of C&SL's

statement which is that a concept, say, 'brown' applies of its very essence to every particular that

is brown. This view is presumably motivated by the fact that to know the concept 'brown' one

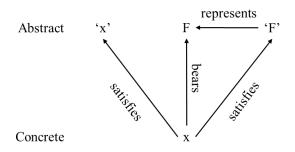does not need to know each and every actual, or hypothetical, entities that are brown.

If this understanding of C&SL's view of what belongs to the essence of a concept is

paired with (CT),[95] then we get that 'x is F' is a conceptual truth if for any particular x that has

the property of F, it belongs to the essence of the concept 'F' that, necessarily, anything that

satisfies the concept 'x', also satisfies the concept 'F'. Call this formulation (CT2), which is

given a schematic representation in Figure 5.1.

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[92] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 414 fn. 33
[93] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 410
[94] Copp (2018) pg. 101 Also, Evers and Streumer (2016) give a similar interpretation
[95] Recall that (CT) states that 'x is F' as a conceptual truth if it belongs to the essence of 'F' that, necessarily, anything that satisfies 'x' also satisfies 'F'
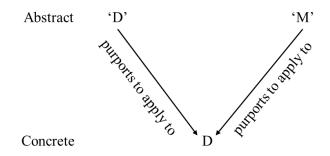
Fig. 5.1 This schematic is meant to portray the different relations involved in (CT2). I have assumed that both the property F and the concepts 'x' and 'F' are abstract, while what satisfies 'x' is concrete. The arrows are meant to grammatically order a proposition that states the relation. For example, there is an arrow from x to F, which represents the proposition 'x bears F'. I used the terms 'satisfies', instead of 'applies to', but to the diagram could be modified so that it reads as ''x' applies to x', for example, if the outer left arrow is reversed and 'satisfies' is replaced with 'applies to'.

We can now see why Copp thinks that treating the moral fixed points as conceptual truths implies that there are moral properties. It does not seem that we can know of a property's existence merely from our concepts, and so Copp concludes that it is implausible that the moral fixed points are conceptual truths.

5.5 Necessary Connections

I think that the three objections mentioned can be addressed, albeit not along lines that I am confident C&SL would endorse. What I have in mind is a specific interpretation of (CT). Let 'D is M' be a proposition where 'M' is a moral concept and 'D' is a complex descriptive concept that describes a situation in which 'M' applies. We can then say that 'D is M' is a conceptual truth if it belongs to the essence of 'M' that, necessarily, anything that 'D' purports to apply to, 'M' also purports to apply to. Call this condition (CT3),[96] which is also given a schematic representation in Figure 5.2.

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[96] (CT3) may be equivalent to what C&SL intended by (CT), but I do not want to assume this so I will continue to distinguish (CT3) from (CT).

Abstract   'D'   'M'

purports to apply to   *purports to apply to*

Concrete   D

Fig 5.2 This schematic is meant to portray the relationships involved in (CT3). 'M' is a moral concept and 'D' is a complex concept that describes a situation in which 'M' applies. D is a concrete state of affairs that 'D' purports to apply to. I have included D in the diagram, but (CT3) does not require that D actually obtains in order for 'D is M' to be a conceptual truth. All that is required for 'D is M' to be a conceptual truth is for the 'D' and 'M' to *purport* to apply to the same state of affairs.

(CT3) may seem puzzling, and I agree that it is. It is puzzling because conceptual truth according to (CT3) seems to involve some necessary connection between the essences of 'D' and 'M', namely that it belongs to the essence of 'M' to purport to apply to what 'D' purports to apply to.

If we overlook this special necessary connection, we can see how the objections mentioned in Sections 5.2-4 could be addressed. Recall that in Section 5.2 the worry with MCE was that it undermined moral authority. This concern can be addressed if certain moral concepts, such as 'ought', 'right', and 'wrong' that arguably have built in notions of categoricity and authority, are necessarily connected to descriptive concepts in the manner suggested by (CT3). In Section 5.3, Copp made the argument that both an indexical and descriptive interpretation of "beings like us" in "worlds like ours" raises problems for MCE. The indexical interpretation implies that there are conceptual truths about which possible world is actual. The descriptive interpretation relies on the claim that moral concepts "encode" information about all the situations in which they apply. If there are substantive moral propositions that are true in virtue of (CT3), then this is exactly right. The concept 'wrong' does encode information about which situations are wrong. Lastly, the worry expressed in Section 5.4 that the truth of the moral fixed points conceptually entails the existence of moral properties can be avoided using (CT3),

because (CT3) does not require anything to exist beyond the concepts in the proposition 'D is M'. Concepts function to purport to apply to things, but what they purport to apply to need not exist in order for a proposition to count as a conceptual truth.

While some sort of necessary connection between the essences of moral concepts and descriptive concepts could remedy the objections raised in Sections 5.2-4, positing such a necessary connection detracts from the explanatory power of MCE because it raises further issues that call for explanation. The most pressing is how to explain this necessary connection between distinct essences, as brute (i.e. inexplicable) necessary connections between distinct essences would seem to count significantly against MCE's explanatory power. If Moore is wrong and moral concepts are reducible to natural concepts, then I could see how this connection would not be brute, but C&SL say that they "think it highly unlikely that moral concepts reduce to natural ones".[97] Nonetheless, they think that we should not be worried about necessary connections between natural and moral concepts because there are examples of "mixed" propositions that contain both moral and natural concepts such as "Values are not sandwiches" and "No promise is a quark".[98] The problem with these examples is that they are not analogous to the substantive moral fixed points as they do not seem to be true in virtue of (CT3). 'Values are not sandwiches' seems to simply reiterate that moral concepts are not reducible to natural concepts, while 'No promise is a quark' seems to follow just from the descriptive aspects of 'quark' and 'promise'. It seems to me that in order for the alleged necessary connection between moral and natural concepts to have an explanation, moral concepts must be in some way analyzable, however complexly, in terms of natural concepts so that the concept 'wrong', say, does encode information about what things are wrong.

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[97] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 402
[98] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 431

If moral truth rests on a brute necessary connection, then how does this affect C&SL's case for the explanatory power of MCE? While I do not think brute necessary connections count decisively against a view, I do think it significantly weakens C&SL's case for the explanatory power of MCE. The first mark against MCE is this glaring brute necessary connection that adds to the unexplained. This bruteness also has consequences for what type of epistemology can be paired with MCE. Since moral knowledge would involve apprehending these brute necessary connections between moral concepts, MCE can no longer plausibly "take over whatever account of conceptual knowledge is best" as C&SL suggest.[99] There would seemingly need to be some special faculty required for apprehending these brute necessary connections. Furthermore, since MCE rests on the assumption that concepts are abstract, it would not only need to explain how we have knowledge of brute necessary connections, but also explain how we have knowledge of brute necessary connections between entities that we have no causal interaction with. If a plausible epistemology can be paired with MCE, then perhaps this would give us reason to overlook the brute necessary connections posited by the view, but without such an account I think what is left unexplained eclipses the payoffs C&SL cite. This, I believe, gives us reason to look elsewhere for an account of moral truth.

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[99] Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) pg. 437

7. Conclusion

  This thesis began with a challenge posed by Hume for those who claim to have moral knowledge. Knowledge implies truth and truth seems to involve either agreement to matter of facts or relations of ideas. The puzzling feature of moral propositions is that they do not seem to fall into either category. This would suggest that we lack moral knowledge. The bulk of this thesis was devoted to discussing two contemporary views that tried to find a place for moral truth as either agreement to a matter of fact or relation of ideas.

  The first view I discussed was 'descriptive moral functionalism' (DMF), which has been advanced by Jackson and Pettit. According to DMF the truth conditions for ethical propositions are given by the functional roles specified by a mature version of our folk-theoretic template of moral intuitions. When a state of affairs possesses the property that satisfies the role specified by mature folk morality the corresponding proposition that represents this fact is true. Jackson and Pettit pair moral functionalism with a form of moral naturalism that is motivated by supervenience related considerations.

  After formulating DMF, several objections to the functionalist aspect of the theory were mentioned. The first one being DMF's use of *mature* folk morality, which seemed to either generate an infinite regress or be circular. I argued that the regress and circularity could be avoided by introducing irreducibly normative concepts into DMF, which would concede an essential point to Moore, or by appealing to "immature" versions of folk morality. I assumed that Jackson and Pettit would not support the first option because one of their goals was to give purely descriptive truth conditions for moral propositions, so I discussed the second option. Jackson and Pettit could use immature versions of folk normative theory to fix the truth conditions for moral propositions, but this approach had a significant drawback due to the

inclusion of substantive moral claims in folk morality and Jackson's claim that folk morality was supposed to contribute to the meaning of moral terms. The drawback was that DMF seemed to lead to implausible claims about who could engage in genuine moral disagreement, and when an attempt to remedy this situation was made it led to concerns about the functionalist template's ability to secure a referent for moral properties. These worries motivated a turn to the other prong of Hume's Fork.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau have articulated a viewpoint, which I called 'moral concept essentialism' (MCE), that argues that moral truth concerns relations of ideas, instead of matters of fact. They argued for MCE by showing off its explanatory power and ability to respond to prominent objections against moral realism. I presented three objections to MCE that claimed that MCE undermined moral authority, was committed to moral concepts encoding information about all the situations in which those concepts apply, and was committed to moral properties existing as a matter of conceptual necessity. Under a certain interpretation of MCE, I argued that MCE could respond to these objections, but not without positing a seemingly brute necessary connection between distinct essences. This detracted from the explanatory power of MCE, which makes it a considerably less attractive view than C&SL had originally hoped it would be.

While I have been drawn to pessimistic conclusion about the ability of DMF and MCE to account for moral truth, I do think these views give us hints at how other projects could tackle the challenge of accounting for moral truth. For example, if DMF's argument for moral naturalism gives us reason to believe that moral properties are descriptive properties, then perhaps there is some other, non-functionalist story to be told about moral truth being a matter of fact. Such a project might allow there to be irreducibly normative concepts, in which case the work to be done would be to explain how these irreducibly normative concepts pick out

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descriptive properties. MCE seemed to be neighbors with idea of moral propositions being examples of the synthetic *a priori*. Perhaps there is room in conceptual space to accommodate such propositions, or perhaps there is no need to because Moore's open question challenge can be overcome, and moral truths are an example of unobvious analytic truths. I have not researched these projects as extensively as I have researched DMF and MCE, so I cannot speak to their prospects, but I think they should at least be considered before we admit that Hume's Fork cannot accommodate moral truth.

Where does this leave us? It seems to me that the conclusions I reached for DMF and MCE, should give us some worry about the prospects of fitting moral truth into one of the two categories proposed by Hume: matters of fact and relations of ideas. This worry should not be overblown into full moral skepticism; however, as this thesis has only considered two attempts to account for the truth of moral propositions. I think that we have a strong intuition that we possess moral knowledge, an intuition that we should not abandon until we have fully considered the ways in which moral truth might be reconciled with Hume's Fork.

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