

DISCUSSION

UNEASY COMPANIONS

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Companions in guilt arguments have recently become a popular strategy for trying to fend off moral scepticism and defend moral realism. Terence Cuneo's *The Normative Web* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), and Hallvard Lillehammer's *Companions in Guilt: Arguments for Ethical Objectivity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) represent two enjoyable and illuminating, though very different, additions to this growing area of inquiry. I begin by explaining how a companions in guilt argument works.

1. Companions in Guilt Arguments

Broadly speaking, a companions in guilt argument locates in one domain (A) features at least very much like those that cause unease in another domain (B) on the assumption that if we find it unappealing or impossible to give them up in A then this should weaken our resistance to allowing them in B. As Lillehammer (pp. 11–13) clarifies, such an argument can proceed either by *entailment* or by *analogy*. The entailment variety locates the troublesome feature in the less contentious domain and argues that its presence there necessitates its presence in the problematic domain. A companions in guilt argument by analogy is less ambitious. It claims only that there is some respect in which the domains are similar. Lillehammer's book is an investigation of the strengths and limitations of this form of argument, and it examines six deployments of it in the literature (three of entailment, three of analogy). Cuneo's book exemplifies one specific instance of a companions in guilt argument by entailment, one that seeks to find the purportedly disreputable features of moral realism in the epistemic domain.

2. Taxonomies

A difficulty for discussing the books together is that the authors divide the terrain somewhat differently (not simply in their

respective use of 'ethical' and 'moral'). Cuneo argues for moral *realism*, Lillehammer examines arguments for ethical *objectivity*. Lillehammer differentiates moral realism from objectivity by identifying realism as a *sufficient*, but not necessary, condition for objectivity. Cuneo, by contrast, operates with a more inclusive conception of moral realism, one that does not require that moral facts be mind-independent. This yields the result that certain constructivist views count as forms of moral *realism* on Cuneo's taxonomy but as non-realist forms of moral *objectivism* on Lillehammer's.

This taxonomic difference reflects a deeper difference between the two books. Cuneo's discussion is in the metaphysical mode, focused upon vindicating moral *facts*, whilst Lillehammer is keen to downplay the metaphysical side of the debate over moral objectivity. An interesting effect of this is the different weights that the authors give to J. L. Mackie's arguments against ethical objectivity. Cuneo focuses almost exclusively on Mackie's more influential *argument from queerness* (although the *argument from relativity* makes an appearance), whereas Lillehammer provides a more equal coverage.

Lillehammer's reason for doing things this way is that although he accepts that companions in guilt arguments succeed against 'crude forms of metaphysically motivated subjectivism in ethics' (p. 154) he thinks that 'the primarily ontological issue of realism is not the only one on which the objectivity of ethics or value could reasonably be thought to depend' (p. 155). Although Cuneo's way of carving up of the territory is more common in current discussions, Lillehammer's terminology is useful as a reminder that ethical objectivity can be defended without taking a stand on realism.

3. Lillehammer

Lillehammer provides three 'marks' of objectivity in a domain: the possibility of *error*, the truth of realism in the domain, and *rational inescapability* (p. 9). Realism is sufficient but not necessary for objectivity, so objectivity requires *error* and at least one of *realism* and *inescapability*. As Lillehammer emphasises (p. 5), the possibility of error alone does not alone establish ethical objectivity because the existence of non-vacuous conditions of correct application of ethical concepts is something that subjectivists (his term

for all non-objectivists) can respect. Much therefore hangs on what Lillehammer takes inescapability to be. He actually distinguishes two kinds, one concerning the application of a concept to particular cases, the other concerning having the concept.

Ethical concepts are *weakly* inescapable insofar as speakers who are competent with a given ethical concept cannot *reasonably* differ in what they believe it to apply to. Because we cannot reasonably differ in our judgements as to whether an object falls under the concept *square*, but can reasonably differ as to whether a joke falls under the concept *funny*, *square* (unlike *funny*) possesses this weaker form of inescapability. Ethical concepts are *strongly* inescapable when competent speakers cannot reasonably differ in their commitment (either implicit or explicit) to endorse or apply those concepts. For example, whereas we can reasonably differ as to whether to endorse or apply the concept *slut* (Lillehammer's example), we cannot reasonably differ as to whether to endorse or apply the concept of *contradiction*. Unlike the person who opts out of endorsing or applying *slut*, someone who thought they could opt out of endorsing or applying *contradiction* simply is mistaken.

With his 'marks' of objectivity in place, Lillehammer tests the six companions in guilt arguments. These arguments aim to establish a parallel (one that will vindicate the objectivity of ethics) between ethics and: *propositional attitude ascriptions; hypothetical imperatives; facts and truth; secondary qualities; science; and mathematics.*

An impressive feature of Lillehammer's book is his coverage of a number of difficult arguments from Davidson, McDowell, Putnam, and Wiggins. Doing so involves him in doing some reconstruction to make their positions clearer. Whilst this sometimes makes progress quite slow, Lillehammer's patient reconstructions add further value to the book. Anyone trying to get clear on the complex positions that these philosophers take up would be advised to try his articulations.

Something else that is helpful is that although the conceptions of the non-ethical domain used in companions in guilt arguments are often highly contentious – especially Putnam's antirealist metaphysical position – Lillehammer lets them stand *arguendo*. This keeps things more focused, even if some readers may find themselves wanting to disagree with the arguments at the first step, and others may be disappointed by the absence of discussion of the respective subject matters themselves.

Despite the disparate areas of philosophy the arguments traverse, Lillehammer's responses to the arguments have a common form – the suggestion of a 'problem of residue'. Constraints of space preclude coverage of all of them so I confine the rest of my attention to only two, to show how the 'problem of residue' emerges and to bring out an issue in Lillehammer's discussion of Davidson.

One of the companions in guilt arguments by entailment that Lillehammer considers is from Jean Hampton and Christine Korsgaard. They argue that Humean subjectivists cannot simultaneously balk at the *normativity* of categorical reasons whilst accepting that there are normative requirements of instrumental rationality. Lillehammer's move is to acknowledge (p. 55) that Mackie's formulation of his argument overstates his case (by inviting an unwelcome scepticism about normativity as such), but to claim that subjectivists can consistently recognise the normativity of formal hypothetical imperatives whilst maintaining that rational inescapability does not extend to the choice of ends themselves. And because rational inescapability does not extend over the choice of ends, we are left with a residue of indeterminacy, one that thwarts the ambitions of the ethical objectivist by allowing *substantial* ethical norms to be rationally escapable in a way that allows for relativism.

Whilst there is room to disagree with Lillehammer (p. 49) as to whether the issue between the subjectivist and Hampton and Korsgaard is not about normativity as such but about the *extent* of the domain of rational inescapability, their argument is clearly of companions in guilt form. This does not seem true of the argument that Lillehammer considers from Donald Davidson. Davidson's argument is a transcendental argument that purports to deliver the objectivity of value judgements from the truth of attributions of propositional attitudes. Part of Davidson's argument is the claim that there are limits to the extent that two people can disagree whilst still being able to understand each other and that these limits are provided by the beliefs and desires that they have in common, and which are required in order for each to be able to interpret the other. In order for us to be able to understand each other we must agree in at least some of our value judgements.

A first worry about Lillehammer's discussion of Davidson is that unlike the other arguments Lillehammer considers, there is no straightforward answer to the question: what is the feature that this domain shares with the ethical (wherein it is problematic)? In

the case of mathematics, one answer is ‘their ultimately resting on a bedrock of contingent and natural dispositions’. But it is hard to tell what the answer to this question is, for the argument from Davidson. The guilt-making feature shared by ethics and propositional attitudes is never made clear.

Secondly, it seems that Davidson’s argument might aim at a conclusion very different from these other arguments. Much of Davidson’s argument appears to be that value judgements have a fixed truth *value*. That is, Davidson’s target looks to be relativists, who think that value judgements have truth values that vary between cultures (or between individuals), and non-cognitivists, who think that value judgements lack truth values because they are not beliefs. Davidson is clear that value judgements can be objective in his sense irrespective of whether they are true, false, or neither, (‘The Objectivity of Values’, 42, 56) and he is open in conceding that it is not the case that what we agree on is therefore true (ibid. 51).¹ This invites the worry that Davidson’s argument is an attempt to establish a distinct, and much less ambitious, kind of objectivity for value judgements than that sought by the other philosophers that Lillehammer considers. This kind of objectivity in value judgements is one that Mackie and any other error theorist would accept.

Lillehammer (p. 39) anticipates this objection and claims that it is ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ that Davidson considers a considerable range of evaluative judgements to come out as true, and not merely as objective in this weaker sense. But he (p. 39) also notes that exactly how this conclusion is to be reached from Davidson’s argument is left unclear. Given this, even if Davidson did think that a considerable range of value judgements come out as true, it seems hasty to claim it is beyond reasonable doubt that Davidson’s argument aimed to establish the more ambitious kind of objectivity.

4. Cuneo

I turn now to Cuneo’s discussion. The particular companions in guilt that he deals with are *epistemic* facts and *moral* facts. He thinks that we find in the epistemic domain all of the apparently

¹ ‘The Objectivity of Values’, in *Problems of Rationality* (OUP, 2004), 39–58.

objectionable features that moral facts purportedly have. The core argument of the book is thus (p. 6):

- (1) If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist.
- (2) Epistemic facts exist.
- (3) So, moral facts exist.
- (4) If moral facts exist, then moral realism is true.
- (5) So, moral realism is true.

Cuneo's moral realism has three parts: a *speech-act thesis*, an *alethic thesis*, and an *ontic thesis*. These hold that: moral discourse is assertoric; the contents of at least some moral claims are true; and they are true because there are irreducible moral facts.

With his form of moral realism outlined, Cuneo moves on to doing the same for its epistemic analogue: *epistemic realism*. Epistemic realism is a similar combination of *speech-act*, *alethic*, and *ontic* components applied to epistemic discourse and facts.

Cuneo devotes much time to identifying four respects in which moral and epistemic facts are similar: their being, implying, or indicating categorical reasons; the structural isomorphism between types of epistemic and moral facts; the similarity (and perhaps identity) of the entities to which they apply and the responses they favour; and the fact that some moral and epistemic facts are not only necessarily coextensive but ontologically entangled.

Cuneo then presents the six objectionable features of moral facts. These are familiar from the literature and an enjoyable aspect of Cuneo's discussion is the way he teases four of them out from Mackie's argument from queerness. They are: the mystery of the *supervenience* of the moral on the non-moral; the supposed intrinsically *motivating* nature of moral facts; their generating *categorical* reasons; the difficulty of accounting for how we *learn* moral facts; the difficulty moral facts have playing *explanatory* roles; and the prevalence of *disagreement* over first-order moral issues. Cuneo's answer is that, insofar as the moral realist must accommodate such objectionables, so too must the epistemic realist.

In places, Cuneo suggests that he does not believe that moral facts must be intrinsically motivating. As such, it is surprising that he makes no mention of Ralph Wedgwood's diagnosis of "The Metaethicists' Mistake", namely the confusion of the (purportedly) intrinsically motivating nature of moral *judgements* with an intrinsically motivating moral *fact*. That Cuneo does not mention

this is a shame, for it would have enabled him to ditch one of the more difficult objectionables, as well as helping in the effort to correct the conflation of a putative feature of moral judgements with a feature of moral facts, or properties.

Chapter 4 plays a crucial role in Cuneo's arguments against the alternatives to epistemic realism. Therein, Cuneo argues that the epistemic analogue of Mackie's *error theory* – 'epistemic nihilism' – has three undesirable results. The root of these results is a dilemma formulated as a question: Do we have reason to believe epistemic nihilism? Cuneo claims that if epistemic nihilists hold that there *are* such reasons then their position is self-defeating. Alternatively, if they maintain that there are no such reasons, they incur the following undesirable results (117–121):

- (1) Epistemic nihilism is 'polemically toothless' because '[n]o one would make a rational mistake in rejecting it and no one would be epistemically praiseworthy in accepting it'.
- (2) Epistemic nihilism implies a radical version of epistemological scepticism according to which no entity can display an epistemic merit or demerit.
- (3) Epistemic nihilism implies that there could be no arguments for anything.

These undesirable results are important because Cuneo's strategy for arguing against forms of epistemic expressivism is to show that they share these results – as well as having the further trouble of accounting for the apparently assertoric nature of epistemic discourse. They are also important because Cuneo's objection to radical forms of epistemic reductionism is that they are tantamount to epistemic nihilism and face the same undesirable results.

Cuneo allocates relatively little space to the case against epistemic nihilism, given its importance to the argument as a whole. This comes at the cost of seeming to unnecessarily hamper the epistemic nihilist at the outset. This is because when Cuneo generates the undesirable results for epistemic nihilism he uses an understanding of evidence that equates it with an epistemic reason for belief (the sort of thing the epistemic nihilist denies the existence of). This equivalence bears on the first horn of the dilemma Cuneo presents to the epistemic nihilist and on the supposed implication that, given epistemic nihilism, there could be no arguments for anything.

Cuneo is clearly correct to observe that epistemic nihilism would be self-refuting if it held that there were *epistemic reasons* to believe in epistemic nihilism. And if evidence for P is identical to an epistemic reason to believe P, then it looks like there could neither be evidence for the truth of epistemic nihilism, nor arguments for it. However, epistemic nihilists will likely protest at this. Whilst they must agree that there are no reasons to believe in epistemic nihilism they will not sign up to understanding the evidential support that a premise provides for a conclusion in Cuneo's manner, in which it is equivalent to being an epistemic reason. An epistemic nihilist will likely claim: that they are only offering arguments for the truth of epistemic nihilism; that what they offer is evidence for its being true; that such evidence is not identical to a reason to believe epistemic nihilism (otherwise epistemic nihilism would cease to be nihilism); and that such evidence does not generate reasons to believe epistemic nihilism.

The best account of evidence is perhaps one in which evidence is normative and implies categorical reasons for belief. But it would be better to determine the conception of evidence most amenable to epistemic nihilism and argue against epistemic nihilism with it in place. The understanding of evidence that Cuneo starts off with invites the worry that the case against epistemic nihilism is being made easier than it should be. Although this is not a major problem – Cuneo acknowledges the worry and explains how he would reformulate his argument in light of it in a later footnote (p. 121, n. 7) – it is disappointing that he unnecessarily loads the dice against the epistemic nihilist in the official presentation of this crucial argument.

After discussing more recent formulations of Expressivism, Cuneo tackles Epistemic Reductionism. Most of the focus in the latter case is on arguing against 'Moderate Reductionism', the view that there *are* epistemic reasons but that they are instrumental (rather than categorical) in character and are driven by the particular cognitive goals an agent has. He argues that such views are: inconsistent with plausible internalist and externalist views of epistemic justification; that they yield forms of epistemic relativism; and that the normativity of instrumental epistemic reasons would be no less mysterious than the normativity of categorical reasons anyway. Cuneo then discusses and rejects 'radical reductionism' of the Quinean 'Epistemology Naturalized' variety – that in which epistemic normativity is to be naturalised away completely.

To briefly comment on the book *in toto*, there is a link between the book's greatest vice and one of its virtues. The vice is the proliferation of technical terms, especially when Cuneo is taking on potential objections. For example, chapters 2 and 3, contain a wave of technical terms and distinctions that often make a relatively simple point more complicated. Thus, the distinctions between *proprietary* and *responsibility* norms and *volitional* and *non-volitional* directives, are not only unnecessary – the plausible claim they are used to support is more easily seen without them – but it also looks (despite Cuneo's claim to the contrary, p. 94, n. 13) as if they are doing the same job. The jargon-heavy parts of the book are disappointing because in the parts where he dispenses with the jargon Cuneo does superbly. One of the best aspects of the book is that it manages to cover difficult material in a way that is accommodating for those new to these debates whilst remaining stimulating to those to whom they are already familiar.

5. Concluding remarks

It is unfortunate for the reader that both these works came out at the same time. Though both are rewarding as they stand, one cannot help but wish that there had been opportunity for one of the authors to incorporate discussion of the other. Particularly, it would be interesting to have seen Lillehammer tackle companions in guilt arguments in the mould offered by Cuneo (either by analogy or entailment). Lillehammer briefly mentions Cuneo's argument near the end of his discussion (p. 170) but without a full response. Among the various options he could pursue in response to Cuneo, there are two potential moves that are worth briefly mentioning.

First, we might be able to use cross-cultural relativity to drive a wedge between ethics and epistemology. Like Mackie, Lillehammer emphasises the diversity of substantial ethical norms between cultures. By contrast, in the epistemic realm it not only seems safe to believe that this degree of variety is not replicated but, more importantly, there is the difficulty of even imaging what a body of epistemic norms that differed from ours to the relevant degree could be like. Whilst cultures differ in what kinds of things they take to be evidence, this does not equate to a body of epistemic norms that is both internally coherent and fundamentally unlike ours, in the way that ethical norms appear to be. If this is so then,

for whatever similarities could be found between ethics and epistemology, there is a countervailing dissimilarity to be considered – one that is perhaps capable of undermining the companions in guilt argument.

A second tactic would be to try and undermine the companions in guilt argument by denying that the distinction between ethics and epistemology is great enough for one of these domains to vindicate the other. Cuneo prepares the ground for such a move by flagging up the possibility that the moral and epistemic realms might be ontologically entangled. For instance, epistemic facts might also be moral facts and epistemic virtues might also be moral virtues. By suggesting that epistemology may in fact be a branch of ethics, such a position would undermine the degree to which epistemology could have its innocence determined separately from ethics. If we had doubts about the objectivity or realist credentials of ethics, these would pass over to epistemology. Whatever the prospects of such an argument, Cuneo and Lillehammer's discussions should act as a spur for philosophers to work out exactly what the relationship between the ethical and the epistemic is and the extent to which the features of the latter can assuage the troubles with the former.

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