

Rescuing Companions in Guilt Arguments

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Abstract

Christopher Cowie has recently argued that companions in guilt arguments against the moral error theory that appeal to epistemic reasons cannot work. I show that such companions in guilt arguments can work if, as we have good reason to believe, moral reasons and epistemic reasons are instances of fundamentally the same relation.

Key Words: Companions in Guilt; Moral Error Theory; Epistemic Reasons

In a recent issue of *Philosophical Quarterly* Christopher Cowie argues that companions in guilt arguments against the moral error theory that appeal to the existence of epistemic reasons cannot work. According to such companions in guilt arguments:

- (1) According to the moral error theory, moral reasons are metaphysically problematic because they are categorically normative
 - (2) But epistemic reasons are categorically normative
 - (3) And there are epistemic reasons
- So,
- (4) There are categorically normative properties
- So,

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(5) Moral error theorists' scepticism about moral reasons, on the grounds of moral reasons' categorical normativity is unwarranted.¹

Cowie argues that this type of argument, which has been made by Terence Cuneo, Philip Stratton-Lake, and Richard Rowland could not possibly work.²

The idea here is that the move from (4) to (5) is not justified because to show that there are some categorically normative properties is not to show that categorically normative properties are not metaphysically problematic. And, so long as categorically normative properties are metaphysically problematic, showing that there are some facts *E* that are categorically normative will not show that there are no grounds for scepticism about facts *M* on the grounds of *M*'s categorical normativity.³

More specifically, according to Cowie, appealing to epistemic reasons cannot help undermine scepticism about moral reasons because either (a) the appeal by proponents of the companions in guilt argument to (some) epistemic reasons is made because (these) epistemic reasons have some special property that moral reasons do not have that gives us grounds to hold that there are (these) epistemic reasons. In which case showing that there are (these) epistemic reasons will not be sufficient to show that there are no grounds for scepticism about moral reasons on account of their categorical normativity; this is Cowie's (2014: 410) objection from disparity. Or (b) there are no special properties that the epistemic reasons, which proponents of companions in guilt arguments appeal to, have that moral reasons do not have. In which case there is no need to appeal to

¹ See Cuneo (2007), Cowie (2014), and Rowland (2013).

² Cuneo's version of this argument is also based on other shared properties of moral and epistemic reasons but these other shared properties of moral and epistemic reasons are not pertinent to the argument in this paper.

³ Cowie (2014: 416-8)

epistemic reasons as proponents of companions in guilt arguments do. In this case companions in guilt arguments are redundant; this is Cowie's objection from redundancy.⁴

In this paper I'll argue that we are justified in holding (5) on the basis of (2), (3), and the claim that epistemic reasons for belief and moral reasons for action are instances of the same fundamental relation just with different relata. In section 1 I argue that we should hold that *either* epistemic reasons and moral reasons are instances of fundamentally the same relation with different relata *or* epistemic and moral reasons are metaphysically unproblematic. In section 2 I argue that if epistemic reasons and moral reasons are instances of fundamentally the same relation with different relata, then so long as there are epistemic reasons, we can conclude that

- (5) Moral error theorists' scepticism about moral reasons, on the grounds of moral reasons' categorical normativity is unwarranted

In section 3 I address the analogy Cowie draws between the companions in guilt argument and the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument. I argue that this analogy does not give us reasons to doubt (5) if epistemic reasons and moral reasons are instances of fundamentally the same relation and there are epistemic reasons.

I. Epistemic and Moral Reasons are either instances of the same fundamental relation or Unproblematic

⁴ Cowie (2014: 410)

In his brief epistemic companions in guilt argument, Philip Stratton-Lake (2002: xxv-i) articulates the view that epistemic and moral reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation just with different relata when he claims that

The difference between practical and epistemic reasons is not that they stand in different warranting relations to certain things (one relation queer and the other innocuous), but that they warrant different things. Practical reasons warrant pro-attitudes and actions, whereas epistemic reasons warrant beliefs.

And Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star (2009: 219) hold that the view that epistemic and moral reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation is the default view (a default that they endorse) when they claim that ‘epistemic and practical reasons should be thought of as being of the same basic kind prior to the presentation of good arguments to the contrary’.⁵

There are several good reasons to hold that epistemic and moral reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation. Firstly, as both proponents of companions in guilt arguments and Cowie accept, both epistemic and moral reasons are categorical.⁶

Secondly, if we hold that epistemic and moral reasons are fundamentally different relations, then ‘reason’ in ‘that there are dinosaur bones is a reason to believe dinosaurs once roamed the earth’ has as much in common with ‘reason’ in ‘that she’ll die if you don’t save her is a reason to save her’ as ‘bank’ in ‘that is a river bank’ has in common

⁵ Note that although I talk about reasons as relations in this paper the view that reasons are relations does not entail the view that reasons are not facts, for some facts may just be relations or relations may just consist in other facts. Furthermore, it seems to me that all talk of reasons as relations in this paper could be changed to talk of reasons as facts without any substantial consequences for the argument in this paper.

⁶ Cowie accepts this for the sake of his paper.

with 'bank' in 'that is a financial bank', that is absolutely nothing beyond sounding the same when pronounced. But 'reason' in 'that there are dinosaur bones is a reason to believe dinosaurs once roamed the earth' and 'reason' in 'that she'll die if you don't save her is a reason to save her' do not have nothing in common.⁷

Thirdly, we can construct grammatically correct sentences according to which the same fact is an epistemic reason to believe something and a moral reason to act but in which 'is a reason' appears only once. For instance, the following sentence is grammatically correct: 'that she's drowning and only I can save her is a reason to believe that she'll die if I save her and to save her'. But we wouldn't expect 'is a reason' to only appear once in this sentence if epistemic and moral reasons were not instances of the same fundamental relation.⁸

There would be reason to believe that epistemic and moral reasons are not instances of the same relation if it were easier to reduce epistemic reasons to natural/non-normative facts than it is to reduce moral reasons to natural/non-normative facts. But proponents of the companions in guilt argument have argued at length that this is not the case and Cowie assumes for the sake of his argument that it is not easier to

⁷ A referee has objected that if epistemic reasons and moral reasons are not instances of the same fundamental type of relation they may still be more closely related than financial banks and river banks. Because epistemic reasons could be a type of reason that is distinct from the type of reason that moral reasons are, for instance, epistemic reasons could be hypothetical reasons, that is, reasons that are normative only if one has reason to engage in the practice of believing, and it could be that moral reasons are not merely hypothetical or conditional in this way. However, either such conditional reasons are instances of fundamentally the same relation as unconditional reasons; they merely apply in different circumstances. Or such conditional reasons are reducible to non-normative facts, such as to the desires or dispositions of all those who engage in the practice of believing, as other conditional and hypothetical reasons are (see Olson 2011: 65). And if such conditional reasons are so reducible to non-normative facts, they will consist in a fundamentally different relation from unconditional non-hypothetical reasons. If epistemic reasons are reducible to non-normative facts in this way, then they would seem to have as much in common with reasons that are not reducible to such non-normative facts as financial banks have in common with river banks

⁸ See Kearns and Star (2009: 220).

reduce epistemic reasons to natural/non-normative facts than it is to reduce moral reasons to natural/non-normative facts.⁹

Of course, even if it is not easier to reduce epistemic reasons to natural/non-normative facts than it is to reduce moral reasons to natural/non-normative facts it may still be the case that both epistemic and moral reasons can be reduced to natural/non-normative facts. But if both epistemic and moral reasons can be reduced to natural/non-normative facts, moral reasons are not metaphysically strange since they are identical to natural/non-normative facts. (It might seem that moral reasons that are identical to natural/non-normative facts might still be metaphysically strange if they are categorical reasons. However, the standard understanding of categorical reasons, according to which they cannot be reduced to facts about desires, aims, wants, or roles, entails that categorical reasons cannot be reduced to natural/non-normative facts.)¹⁰

II. If Epistemic and Moral Reasons as instances of the same fundamental relation, moral scepticism is unwarranted

So, epistemic and moral reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation or they are metaphysically unproblematic. Suppose that epistemic and moral reasons aren't obviously metaphysically unproblematic and so are instances of the same fundamental relation. Call the fundamental relation that epistemic and moral reasons are instances of relation *R*. According to Cowie, proponents of companions in guilt arguments only show that there are some instances of categorical reasons that have other 'special' properties

⁹ See Rowland (2013: §2), Cuneo (2007), and Cowie (2014: 410).

¹⁰ See Olson (2011: 64-5).

such as the property of being self-defeating to deny (Cueno) or the property of being entailed by knowledge that there must be (Rowland). And, showing that there are some instances of categorical reasons that have particular special properties only overrides the case for metaphysical scepticism about those particular categorical reasons that have these special properties.¹¹ But if epistemic and moral reasons are both fundamentally Rs, and there are instances of relation R—as Cowie assumes—then the only thing that could metaphysically count against positing more instances of R on the basis of Rs' categorical normativity is a requirement of *quantitative* parsimony. That is, a requirement according to which it is better not to *posit more of the same kind of thing*, rather than a requirement of *qualitative* parsimony according to which it is better not to *posit new kinds of things*. (Since, to hold that there are more Rs is not to hold that there is a new kind of thing).

Some philosophers have argued that quantitative parsimony is a virtue of a theory. However, these philosophers admit that many of the good reasons to hold a qualitative parsimony requirement are not good reasons to hold a quantitative parsimony requirement.¹² And have only sought to establish that quantitative parsimony is a *pro-tanto* theoretical virtue that may get outweighed by any competing consideration or that quantitative parsimony is only important when the more quantitatively parsimonious theory is likely to provide a better explanation of a phenomenon.¹³

Now let's consider two theories. *Theory A* holds that there are categorical reasons beyond epistemic reasons. *Theory B* holds that the only categorical reasons that exist are epistemic reasons. If quantitative parsimony is a consideration that can be outweighed by *any competing consideration*, then the fact that *Theory B* is more quantitatively parsimonious

¹¹ Cowie (2014: 416)

¹² See Baker (2003: 248 and 255-6).

¹³ See Nolan (1997: esp. 337) and Baker (2003).

than *Theory A* will be outweighed by the fact that *Theory B* entails that much of our discourse and practice is in vast error; since we believe that there are moral reasons to do things.

And it's hard to see how such a quantitatively parsimonious theory when it comes to categorical reasons would provide a better explanation of anything. If anything, a more quantitatively parsimonious theory when it comes to categorical reasons seems less explanatory, since such a quantitatively parsimonious theory would not be able to explain how much of our discourse is not in error. Without further justification it is hard to see why we should hold that there are as few categorical reasons of the same fundamental kind as possible. The only further obvious reason, a preference for desert landscapes and for fewer entities rather than more, is dialectically toothless.¹⁴

It might seem that Cowie's point is that proponents of companions in guilt arguments such as Cuneo and Rowland do not show that there are instances of relation *R tout court*. But rather only show that there are particular kinds of instances of relation *R*, namely instances of *R* that have further 'special' properties such as the property of being self-defeating to deny the existence of (Cuneo) or the property of being entailed by knowledge that there must be (Rowland). But it could only be quantitative parsimony that would count against positing such instances of *R* that do not have these properties. Since to hold that there are instances of *R* that do not have these 'special' properties is not to posit a new type of relation, but merely to posit more instances of a relation that there must be, that we should already be committed to there being instances of, or that it is self-defeating to not be committed to. And, it is not plausible that an instance of *R* that is entailed by knowledge that there must be or is an instance of *R* that it is self-defeating

¹⁴ Cf. Baker (2003: 255-6).

to deny the existence of, is a fundamentally distinct relation from instances of R that do not have such properties.

To further see that if epistemic and moral reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation and there are epistemic reasons, then scepticism about moral reasons is not warranted, consider the following case in which we know that there is an instance of something with a metaphysically mysterious property. Suppose that I've just been to an island in the South Pacific. And in virtue of having just gone there I know a set of facts about this island. I know that the number of people who live on this island is 246, that they got the internet on 3 December 2013, that their preferred dish is, surprisingly, passion fruit yoghurt, and so on. Suppose that I return home and see my very young daughter. I ask my daughter questions about the island. And to my astonishment she gets all the questions right: she knows how many people live on the island, when they got the internet, what their favourite dish is, etc.

Now, normally I should think that there must be some explainable link between my young daughter and the island that I'm not aware of: for instance she must have been told these facts about the island or have read them somewhere. Since her answers would be miraculous and inexplicable if there was no such explainable link. But suppose that *I know* that my daughter's answers to these questions about the island are *inexplicably correct*. In this case I know that there is a state of affairs X that has a metaphysically mysterious property, that of being an instance of an inexplicable strong connection, since I know that this connection is inexplicable. But in this case, since I know that my daughter has been inexplicably correct about many facts about the island in the South Pacific, the reasons to be sceptical of her having inexplicably correct beliefs about further facts about this island in the South Pacific are overridden even though I do not know that there is a

connection between my daughter and these further facts. For instance, I should not have high credence in the view that if I ask her further questions about the island, she will get them wrong. And I should not be surprised if she gets more questions about the island inexplicably correct.¹⁵

But although I should not be sceptical of further inexplicable connections between my daughter and facts about the island in the South Pacific, the metaphysical strangeness of inexplicable strong connections has not been overridden in general for I should still be sceptical about further inexplicable connections between, for instance, other people and other types of facts. I should, for instance, still be extremely sceptical of clairvoyance in general. I should still be sceptical of anyone who claims to know how my future is going to turn out on first meeting me and I should still be sceptical of, for instance, faith healing. So, in this case the weirdness of an inexplicable connection between S , my daughter, and facts of type F , is eliminated as a sufficient ground to doubt that there is a connection between S and facts of type F even though (a) we only know that there is an inexplicable connection between S and a subset of facts of type F , namely those that we know that S is inexplicably connected to. And even though (b) the metaphysical weirdness of inexplicable connections is not extinguished as a sufficient

¹⁵ A referee has suggested that although they might have a higher credence in their daughter being right in her beliefs about further facts about the island than they would have had if she hadn't been right in her earlier beliefs about the island, it doesn't follow from this that this rise in credence would override their initial scepticism. According to the referee, whether the initial scepticism would have been overridden 'depends [on] how sceptical I was initially, what I know about my daughter, and so on. I may still have a higher credence in her being wrong than her being right'. However, in this case, regardless of my past credence, *beforehand* I should have had very high credence in the proposition (p) that if there were no explainable link between my daughter and facts of this type, then she would get questions about these facts wrong. And my justified scepticism about this inexplicable connection between my daughter and this particular kind of fact would have just consisted in my justified high or very high credence in p . But *after* my discovery that there is an inexplicable connection between my daughter and facts of this type, it is no longer the case that I should have very high credence in proposition p . And therefore I could no longer have a justified scepticism about inexplicable connections between my daughter and further facts of this kind. Since my justified scepticism would just consist in my justified high or very high credence in p and I can no longer *justifiably* have such high or very high credence.

reason to doubt the existence of further inexplicable connections between S , or others, and other types of facts.

And similarly, once we know that there are instances of the basic relation R , the weirdness of the properties that R s have is eliminated as a sufficient reason to be sceptical of R s even though we only know that there are a subset of R s. Even if the features of R s that are metaphysically weird still provide sufficient reason to doubt that there are things other than R s that have these features.

So, I've shown that

- (A) Moral and epistemic reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation or they are metaphysically unproblematic;
- (B) If epistemic and moral reasons are both instances of the same fundamental relation and there are some epistemic reasons, considerations of quantitative parsimony do not provide us sufficient reason to doubt that there are moral reasons; and
- (C) If there are instances of fundamental relation R , and R s are categorically normative, the only non-overridden metaphysical grounds for scepticism about R s on the basis of their categorical normativity are considerations of quantitative parsimony;
- (D) So, if epistemic and moral reasons are both categorically normative and are both instances of the same fundamental relation, and there are epistemic reasons, there are no non-overridden metaphysical grounds for scepticism about moral reasons on the basis of their categorical normativity.

And it follows from the combination of (A-D) and two premises that both Cowie and proponents of the companions in guilt argument accept, namely that there are epistemic reasons and that epistemic reasons are categorically normative, that:

- (5) Moral error theorists' scepticism about moral reasons, on the grounds of moral reasons' categorical normativity is unwarranted.¹⁶

III. The Quine/Putnam Indispensability Argument Analogy

In his paper Cowie draws an analogy with the Quine/Putnam mathematical indispensability argument, or rather with the views of the proponents of this argument, to further his attack on companions in guilt arguments that appeal to epistemic reasons. Proponents of the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument hold that even though mathematical objects are abstract objects we should hold that there are mathematical

¹⁶ It might be argued that (B) is false because what is really puzzling about categorically normative properties is that they cannot be reduced to natural properties, that is, that categorically normative properties are non-natural properties. And if this is what's really puzzling about categorically normative properties, in order to show that there are no non-overridden grounds for scepticism about moral reasons on the basis of their categorical normativity, I would have to show that, for instance, the supervenience and epistemic access challenges to non-natural properties can be met. This line of objection takes us beyond the scope of this paper, since Cowie does not hold that categorically normative properties are puzzling because they are non-natural and non-natural properties are puzzling due to supervenience and epistemic access worries about such properties. However, I do believe that these challenges can be met if we hold that epistemic and moral reasons are both instances of the same fundamental relation and if there are epistemic reasons. For instance, supervenience presents as much of a problem for epistemic reasons if they are non-natural properties as it does for moral reasons if they are non-natural properties. But if moral reasons are non-natural properties, moral reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation as epistemic reasons, and there must be epistemic reasons, then there must be necessary connections between instances of the non-natural relation that moral reasons are an instance of and natural properties even if these necessary connections are unexplainable. So, if moral reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation as epistemic reasons and there are epistemic reasons, the supervenience challenge cannot give us sufficient reason to doubt moral reasons.

objects because the existence of mathematical objects is indispensable to our best science. But proponents of the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument do not conclude that their argument validates the existence of all abstract objects or all mathematical objects but only the mathematical objects that have the special property of being indispensable to our best science. And if the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument does not override the reasons for scepticism about all mathematical objects but only the mathematical objects that are indispensable to our best science, then companions in guilt arguments that appeal to the special properties of (certain) epistemic reasons do not override the reasons for scepticism about all categorical reasons but only (certain) epistemic reasons that have these special properties.¹⁷

If Cowie's argument from this analogy succeeds, then there must be something wrong with my attempted rescue of (5) on the basis of (A-D), namely (B) or (C) must be false. But Cowie's argument from this analogy fails. Proponents of the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument hold that (i) *all* the entities that are indispensable to our best science exist and (ii) *only* the entities that are indispensable to our best science exist.¹⁸ And so, for proponents of the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument, showing that some abstract objects have the special property of being indispensable to our best science could not override reasons to be sceptical of abstract objects that do not have this special property because according to such proponents not having this special property *is on its own sufficient* to ground scepticism in the abstract objects that do not have this property. In contrast, proponents of companions in guilt arguments that appeal to epistemic reasons do not hold that not having the special properties that they hold that certain epistemic reasons have (such as being self-defeating to deny or being entailed by

¹⁷ Cowie (2014: 417-8)

¹⁸ See Colyvan (2001: chapter 2).

knowledge that there must be) *is on its own sufficient* to ground scepticism in categorical reasons (or other entities) that do not have these properties.

This significant disanalogy is one that makes a difference because it explains why proponents of the Quine/Putnam argument do not take their arguments to have overridden the reasons to be sceptical of all abstract mathematical objects rather than just the ones that have the special property of being indispensable. This is not because they hold the general view that

- (I) If one establishes that some instances of fundamental relation R have special properties that vindicate their existence, one has only vindicated the existence of instances of R that have this special property.

Rather proponents of the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument only hold that

- (II) If one establishes that some instances of fundamental relation R have special property P that vindicates their existence and all and only things that have P exist, then one has only vindicated the existence of instances of R that have P .

But in section 2 above I argued that (I) is implausible. And (II) cannot provide us with reasons to doubt moral reasons. Since, we do not and should not hold that the only properties, relations, and objects that exist are those that have the special features that proponents of the companions in guilt argument claim that (certain) epistemic reasons

have such as being entailed by knowledge that we must have and being self-defeating to deny.

So, we can rescue the companions in guilt argument if we hold that moral and epistemic reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation. And since we should hold that moral and epistemic reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation or are metaphysically unproblematic, we can rescue companions in guilt arguments. And so *contra* Cowie, companions in guilt arguments can and do work.¹⁹

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¹⁹ An anonymous referee has suggested two lines of response on behalf of Cowie. Firstly, it might be responded that proponents of the error theory can deny the existence of both moral and epistemic reasons whilst allowing the existence of other epistemic phenomena such as knowledge. However, Rowland (2013, §3) shows that this is not possible. Secondly, it might be responded that proponents of the error theory could claim that we should accept the following claim:

(D) Defeasibly, if some particular property *X* would be categorically normative, we should hold that *X* does not exist.

If proponents of the error theory accepted (D), they could reject the companions in guilt argument for moral reasons on grounds other than quantitative parsimony.

But it is unclear why we should accept (D) or that error theorists have given any reason for us to accept a claim such as (D). (D) might seem attractive and it might seem that we should accept (D) because it is easy to confuse (D) with the claim that

(D*) Defeasibly, if some particular property *X* would be categorically normative, *and there are no categorically normative properties*, we should hold that *X* does not exist.

But, of course, endorsing (D*) will not allow proponents of the error theory to reject the companions in guilt argument. (D) might seem to garner support from the Quine/Putnam indispensability argument, but as I've argued in this paper, this is not the case. So, although endorsing (D) would allow proponents of the error theory to oppose the companions in guilt argument on grounds other than quantitative parsimony doing so would be just as ineffective since we have, or at least have been given, no reason to hold (D).

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