

## On Cuneo's defence of the parity premise

G.J.E. Rutten

### 1. Introduction

In his book 'The Normative Web' Terence Cuneo provides a core argument for his moral realism of a paradigmatic sort. Paradigmatic moral realism is a specific instance of moral realism. It consists of three theses. According to the speech act thesis the nature of some moral discourse is assertoric. This means that some of our ordinary moral sentences are used explicitly to present moral propositions. Moral propositions purport to represent moral facts. The alethic thesis holds that some of these moral propositions are true in a specific realist sense. The moral proposition asserted by the moral sentence 'Smith is cruel' is true just in case it is a moral fact that Smith is cruel. Hence moral propositions are made true by moral facts. A direct consequence of the alethic thesis is that there are moral facts. The third and final thesis states that some of these facts irreducibly exist. The latter means that these facts cannot be reduced to facts of a type that fail to satisfy our commonsensical conception of moral facts. This conception consists of the platitude that 'acts that have one or another positive [negative] moral status are generally concerned to promote [undercut] human flourishing' (T36) and the platitude that 'moral facts are authoritative insofar they provide categorical reasons to act in a certain way' (T38). The core argument that Cuneo provides for his paradigmatic moral realism consists of three premises:

- (i) If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist,
- (ii) Epistemic facts exist,
- (iii) If moral facts exist, then moral realism is true.

From premise (i) and (ii) we can conclude that moral facts exist after which the conclusion that moral realism is true follows directly from premise (iii). In this paper I intend to refute Cuneo's defence of the first premise<sup>1</sup>. Cuneo's core argument for moral realism has to be rejected if my refutation holds.

### 2. Cuneo's defence of the parity premise: the first stage

Cuneo calls his first premise the 'parity premise'. He develops a two-stage argument for this premise. At the first stage he identifies four important respects in which moral and epistemic facts are similar (T53). Some facts of each kind 'are, imply or indicate categorical reasons for properly situated agents to behave themselves in certain ways' (T62). Second, moral and epistemic facts are structurally isomorphic because both kinds of facts are 'plausibly viewed as being constituted by reasons' and because facts of both kinds are 'either particular or general normative facts, on the one hand, or evaluative or deontic normative facts, on the other' (T70). Third, both kinds of facts are constituted by normatively appraisable entities of the same types (T76). Examples of such entities include character traits, intentions, action plans, emotions and propositional attitudes such as believes and hopes. To this similarity Cuneo adds that moral and epistemic facts 'consist in (or indicate) reasons that favor identical modes of response' (T76). A 'mode of response' refers to the types of response a reason can favor, such as the formation of propositional attitudes, the formation of motivational states and the implementation of action plans. The fourth similarity between moral and epistemic facts is that for

---

<sup>1</sup> In the final chapter of his book Cuneo formulates and replies to three objections against his core argument. The first objection concerns the core argument's first premise (T227-228). In his answer Cuneo tries to counter this objection. The refutation of the first premise that I provide in this paper has nothing to do with the final chapter's first objection against this premise. Further, I will not discuss the final chapter's first objection in this paper, nor Cuneo's reply to it, because it is my intention to show that Cuneo's defence of the first premise fails and must therefore be rejected even in case his rebuttal of the final chapter's first objection would be entirely adequate.

some of those facts ‘there is no obvious way to disentangle their moral and epistemic dimensions’ (T80). Especially the fourth similarity motivates the title of Cuneo’s book: the normative domains form a web. The four similarities identified by Cuneo surely contribute to the plausibility of his parity premise. However, they do not provide a conclusive argument for accepting the parity premise. The possibility that no moral facts exist while some epistemic facts do exist cannot be ruled out on the basis of some compelling similarities between both types of facts. Identifying more parallels between moral and epistemic facts does not help to obtain a conclusive argument for the parity premise either.

As part of his first stage Cuneo also tries to refute two objections that purport to show that there are ways in which the existence of moral facts is problematic, but the existence of epistemic facts is not (T80-88). It is important for him to counter these two objections because each of them would render the acceptance of his parity premise highly problematic. The refutation that Cuneo provides in his book is nevertheless not sufficient to establish the parity premise. In this paper Cuneo’s refutation of both objections will not be discussed because I intend to show that his defence of the parity premise has to be rejected even in case his refutation of both mentioned objections would be perfectly correct.

As we have seen the first stage on itself does not provide a convincing reason for accepting the parity premise. This is in line with Cuneo’s own remarks. Cuneo clearly says that the first stage only lays the conceptual groundwork for the argument’s second stage (T7). He also mentions that his first stage provides in fact nothing more than a conceptual backdrop for the real crucial second stage of his two-stage argument (T53). The first stage is also qualified by him as being preparatory in nature. It has as its sole purpose the provisioning of some conceptual footing (T89). According to Cuneo the second stage is the fundamental principal stage of his argument for the parity premise. Only the second stage offers a *direct argument* in favour of the parity premise. Further, Cuneo’s direct argument is in fact fully self-contained. It does not rely on the first stage. Therefore the first stage is really not part of Cuneo’s deduction of the parity premise. It does indeed nothing more than to serve as a background laying the groundwork for the principal second stage that actually provides Cuneo’s direct argument.

### **3. Cuneo’s defence of the parity premise: the second stage**

Let us therefore turn to the principal second stage of his two-stage argument for the parity premise. In the rest of this paper I will show that we have to refute this second stage. From what has been said in the previous section this implies that Cuneo’s whole defence of the parity premise is refuted. In that case the core argument of Cuneo for his paradigmatic moral realism has to be rejected as well. So, what does Cuneo’s direct argument for his parity premise look like? Cuneo provides several descriptions of this argument in his book. Here is the one that can be found in the introduction: “I maintain that there is a class of standard objections ordinarily leveled against the claim that moral facts exist. These objections purport to establish that were moral facts to exist, then they would display what I call the ‘objectionable features’ - properties such as *being intrinsically motivating*, *being categorically reason-giving*, *being explanatorily idle*, and so forth. Were the standard objections to establish this, I contend, then, when suitably modified, they would also establish that were epistemic facts to exist, then they too would exhibit the objectionable features. These two claims allow us to formulate a direct argument for the core argument’s first premise, which goes like this: If moral facts do not exist, then presumably this is simply because they would display the objectionable features. But there is nothing about moral facts in particular that makes their having these features objectionable; it is the character of the *features themselves* that renders moral facts problematic. Accordingly, we can affirm: ‘If moral facts do not exist, then nothing has the objectionable features’. However, if epistemic facts exist, then there is something that has the objectionable features. Or, otherwise put: ‘If nothing has the objectionable features, then epistemic facts do not exist’. From this it follows that the core argument’s first premise is true: (i) If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist” (T8).

The other explanations that Cuneo provides for his direct argument (e.g. T53, T89-90, T112-113 and

T224-225) are not at variance with the above description. Therefore I will take the description from the introduction of Cuneo's book as the basis for the rest of this paper. If required for my account I will however also refer to one or more of the other descriptions of the direct argument that can be found in Cuneo's book. However, unless otherwise stated I refer to the above quoted description from the introduction of Cuneo's book when I analyse and evaluate Cuneo's direct argument in this paper.

#### 4. Explicating the premises and conclusion of Cuneo's direct argument

In order to evaluate Cuneo's direct argument we will first explicate its premises and conclusion. His argument consists of a single conclusion: the parity premise. So what are its premises? I will show in this section that the direct argument consists of precisely three premises.

Cuneo first of all states that there exist 'a class of standard objections ordinarily leveled against the claim that moral facts exist'. This class of standard objections consists of six members: 'There are, by my counting, six major types of argument that are typically pressed against moral realism. In what follows, I shall sketch a representative version of each type of argument' (T90). Cuneo also asserts in his direct argument: "These objections [i.e. the standard objections against the claim that moral facts exist] purport to establish that were moral facts to exist, then they would display what I call the 'objectionable features' and 'there is nothing about moral facts in particular that makes their having these features objectionable; it is the character of the *features themselves* that renders moral facts problematic'". This assertion implies that for each objectionable feature  $x$  the following deduction corresponds to one of the standard objections against moral realism:

If moral facts exist, then they would display objectionable feature  $x$ ,  
It's impossible that something displays objectionable feature  $x$ ,  
Therefore moral facts do not exist.

It also implies that each standard objection against moral realism corresponds to the above deduction for one objectionable feature  $x$ . Hence the first premise of Cuneo's direct argument can be stated as:

The function that maps each objectionable feature  $x$  to the deduction 'If moral facts exist, then they would display objectionable feature  $x$ . It's impossible that something displays objectionable feature  $x$ . Therefore moral facts do not exist' constitutes a one-to-one correspondence between the objectionable features and the standard objections.

Since there are six standard objections against moral realism there are also six objectionable features. Cuneo mentions three of such features in his direct argument. The other three objectionable features are according to Cuneo: 'being supervenient on mere descriptive facts', 'being cognitively inaccessible' and 'being subject to massive and ineradicable disagreement concerning its nature' (T90-T107).

In this paper we will introduce some terminology to obtain concise representations of the premises of Cuneo's direct argument. Let  $OF$  be the set of objectionable features and let  $SO$  be the set of standard objections against moral realism. Further let the function  $f: OF \rightarrow SO$  be defined as follows. For all  $x$  in  $OF$   $f(x)$  equals the deduction 'If moral facts exist, then they would display objectionable feature  $x$ . It's impossible that something displays objectionable feature  $x$ . Therefore moral facts do not exist'. From this terminology we obtain the following concise representation of the first premise of Cuneo's direct argument:

P1: The function  $f: OF \rightarrow SO$  is a one-to-one correspondence.

The second premise on which Cuneo's direct argument is based is the claim that the set of standard objections against moral realism exhaust all objections to moral realism:

The set of standard objections against moral realism is equal to the set of all objections against moral realism

It might not be apparent from the above description of the direct argument that this claim is indeed a premise of Cuneo's direct argument. However, that this is in fact the case is immediately clear from the following quote in another description of the direct argument that can be found in Cuneo's book: 'On the assumption that these arguments [i.e. the set of standard objections] exhaust the objections to moral realism, I have contended that, were these objections to establish that there are no moral facts, then they would also establish (when suitably modified) that epistemic facts do not exist' (T112-113). Let  $O$  be the set of all objections against moral realism. The second premise is briefly described as:

P2:  $SO=O$ .

Further Cuneo asserts in his direct argument: 'Were the standard objections to establish this [i.e. the conclusion that moral facts do not exist], I contend, then, when suitably modified, they would also establish that were epistemic facts to exist, then they too would exhibit the objectionable features [and from this it follows that epistemic facts do not exist either]'. Cuneo substantiates this assertion by demonstrating how each of the six standard objections against moral realism can be transformed into an analogous objection against epistemic realism such that the correctness of the former implies the correctness of the latter (T90-112). More specifically, Cuneo demonstrates in his book that for each objectionable feature  $x$  the correctness of standard objection  $f(x)$  against moral realism implies the correctness of  $g(x)$ , whereby  $g(x)$  is the following analogous objection to epistemic realism:

If epistemic facts exist, then they would display objectionable feature  $x$ ,  
It's impossible that something displays objectionable feature  $x$ ,  
Therefore epistemic facts do not exist.

The third premise of Cuneo's direct argument can therefore concisely be stated in the following way:

P3: For all  $x$  in  $OF$   $\{f(x) \text{ is valid} \Rightarrow g(x) \text{ is valid}\}$ .

In the remainder of his direct argument Cuneo provides an argumentation for the parity premise that relies upon P1, P2 and P3 without introducing any other premises. Hence P1, P2 and P3 are the only premises of Cuneo's direct argument. Therefore we can present Cuneo's direct argument as follows:

P1: The function  $f: OF \rightarrow SO$  is a one-to-one correspondence,  
P2:  $SO=O$ ,  
P3: For all  $x$  in  $OF$   $\{f(x) \text{ is valid} \Rightarrow g(x) \text{ is valid}\}$ ,  
Therefore if moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist.

## 5. Refuting Cuneo's direct argument

So, how does according to Cuneo his parity premise follow from the three premises P1, P2 and P3? Cuneo provides the following argumentation: "If moral facts do not exist, then presumably this is simply because they would display the objectionable features [...]. [Hence,] if moral facts do not exist, then nothing has the objectionable features. However, if epistemic facts exist, then there is something that has the objectionable features. Or, otherwise put: 'If nothing has the objectionable features, then epistemic facts do not exist'" (T8). Cuneo's argumentation is not so easy to interpret. Let us first pay attention to his usage of the word 'presumably'. Surely he cannot mean to say that the claim 'If moral facts do not exist, then this is because they would display the objectionable features' is not his own but is actually a claim made by others that he himself is not really subscribing to. Since he is providing his own direct argument for his parity premise all claims that he is relying on should be his own claims and not those of others. Therefore the word 'presumably' has to be ignored in our

assessment of the deductive structure of Cuneo's direct argument for the parity premise.

However, there is another problem with his argumentation as well. How is his claim 'If moral facts do not exist, then this is because they would display the objectionable features' to be understood? It is clear that the only sensible interpretation of this claim is the following: 'If moral facts do not exist, then there exists an  $x$  in OF such that  $f(x)$  is valid'. Let us call this claim  $C$ .  $C$  is an intermediate result in Cuneo's derivation of the parity premise. How is  $C$  supposed to follow from  $P1$ ,  $P2$  and  $P3$ ? I will show that  $C$  in fact does not follow from  $P1$ ,  $P2$  and  $P3$  at all. I will do this by postulating a possibility that cannot be ruled out by Cuneo as long as he has not provided a conclusive argument for the existence of moral facts (and that therefore surely cannot be ruled out by Cuneo while he is still arguing for his parity premise) and according to which claim  $C$  is false. Such a possibility would indeed show that  $C$  does not follow from premises  $P1$ ,  $P2$  and  $P3$ . The possibility I postulate is the possibility that the following two claims are both true:

- a) moral facts do not exist,
- b) for all  $x$  in OF  $f(x)$  is invalid because
  - moral facts do not display objectionable feature  $x$  and/or
  - the obtainment of  $x$  is not impossible

Note that I am not saying that both claims are true. I am only concerned with the possibility of them being true. First I will show that this possibility cannot be ruled out by Cuneo while arguing for his parity premise. After that I will show that according to this possibility claim  $C$  is false.

First of all it is important to notice that the possibility is consistent with  $P1$ ,  $P2$  and  $P3$  all being true. Therefore Cuneo cannot rule out this possibility on the basis that it makes one of his premises false. Secondly the parity premise is a fundamental part of Cuneo's core argument for moral realism. Hence his direct argument for the parity premise cannot appeal to the claim that moral facts do exist. Such an appeal would of course make Cuneo's core argument for moral realism circular. Therefore (a) can not be ruled out by Cuneo while providing his direct argument. Thirdly the falsehood of claim (b) would imply that there exists an  $x$  in OF for which  $f(x)$  is valid. This would immediately imply that moral realism is false. Therefore Cuneo can also not rule out claim (b). It is instructive for us to grasp for each objectionable feature  $x$  exactly why  $f(x)$  is invalid in the case of paradigmatic moral realism. I will show this now. First, the property *being categorically reason-giving* is the only objectionable feature implied by his moral realism of a paradigmatic sort. It is implied since moral facts according to Cuneo satisfy the platitude that 'moral facts are authoritative insofar they provide categorical reasons to act in a certain way' (T38). The other five objectionable features are not mentioned, nor implied, by the three theses of his moral realism of a paradigmatic sort. For these five objectionable features it is therefore not established that 'If moral facts exist, then they would display objectionable features  $x$ '. Since this claim is the first premise of objection  $f(x)$  we conclude that his paradigmatic moral realism implies that  $f(x)$  is invalid for all  $x$  other than *being categorically reason-giving*. Second, according to the third thesis of Cuneo's paradigmatic moral realism the property *being categorically reason-giving* actually obtains. This implies that the second premise of  $f(\textit{being categorically reason-giving})$  is not true because it is not the case that 'It's impossible that something displays objectionable feature *being categorically reason-giving*'. Therefore Cuneo's moral realism of a paradigmatic sort implies that  $f(\textit{being categorically reason-giving})$  is also invalid. So it follows indeed that all  $f(x)$  fail.

Now I will show that according to the uneliminated possibility  $C$  is false. According to claim (a) the antecedent of  $C$  is true. Claim (b) implies that it is not the case that 'there exists an  $x$  in OF such that  $f(x)$  is valid'. Therefore the consequent of  $C$  is false and thus  $C$  is false as well. We have therefore shown that claim  $C$  does not follow from  $P1$ ,  $P2$  and  $P3$ . Since the rest of Cuneo's direct argument

relies on C we can conclude that his direct argument for the parity premise is invalid and thus refuted.

Does this result imply that we have to reject Cuneo's direct argument? This would be premature since there exist two alternative interpretations of Cuneo's direct argument that are not subject to the refutation provided in this section. In the next section I will present the first alternative interpretation and show that Cuneo's direct argument is also invalid and thus refuted if we posit this alternative interpretation. In section 7 I will present the second alternative interpretation and show that if we posit the second alternative interpretation it follows that the direct argument of Cuneo is not invalid but sadly establishes a variant of the parity premise that is useless for defending moral realism. Hence Cuneo's direct argument is also refuted if we posit the second alternative interpretation. After both additional results have been established we can indeed conclude that Cuneo's direct argument has to be rejected.

### **6. Refuting Cuneo's direct argument in case of its first alternative interpretation**

According to the first alternative interpretation of Cuneo's direct argument C does indeed not follow from the premises P1, P2 and P3. However, C follows from P1, P2, P3 and a specific conception of truth according to which 'p is true' implies that there exists a valid argument for p. Further, according to this alternative interpretation, the parity premise follows from premises P1, P2, P3 and claim C.

I will first of all demonstrate that the parity premise is indeed implied by P1, P2, P3 and C. The parity premise states that 'If moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist'. So let's assume that moral facts do not exist. C states that if moral facts do not exist, then there exists an x in OF such that f(x) is valid. Hence it follows that there exists an x in OF such that f(x) is valid. According to P3 g(x) is valid as well. Therefore there exists a valid objection against the existence of epistemic facts. From this it follows that epistemic facts do not exist. So P1, P2, P3 and C imply indeed the parity premise.

Further it is also correct that C follows from P1, P2, P3 and the above mentioned truth conception. I will show this as well. Claim C states that: 'If moral facts do not exist, then there exists an x in OF such that f(x) is valid'. So let's assume that moral facts do not exist. In that case the claim 'moral facts do not exist' is true. The assumed truth notion implies that there exists a valid argument for the claim 'moral facts do not exist'. There is in other words a valid objection against the claim that moral facts exist. Let o in O be this valid objection. According to P2 the valid objection o is also an element of SO. Further P1 implies that there exists an x in OF such that f(x)=o. Hence there exists an x in OF such that f(x) is valid. We conclude that C indeed follows from P1, P2, P3 and the truth notion.

Should we now conclude that Cuneo's direct argument is valid as long as we stick to the alternative interpretation as discussed in this section? The answer to this question is negative. Cuneo does not provide an argument for accepting the above mentioned specific conception of truth. This should not surprise us because this conception of truth actually conflicts with the assumptions on which Cuneo predicates his core argument. He elucidates these assumptions in the introduction of his book. As part of this elucidation Cuneo states: 'I shall assume that epistemic conceptions of truth are false. That is to say, I will assume that a proposition's being true does not consist in its having some sort of exalted epistemic status such as being ideally justifiable or part of an ideally epistemic status such as being ideally justifiable or part of an ideally coherent system of propositions. I believe this assumption would be largely unremarkable if it were not for the fact that some philosophers seem to believe that, if moral propositions are true, then they are true in an epistemic sense' (T15). So we can indeed conclude that the above mentioned conception of truth contradicts one of Cuneo's key assumptions. Cuneo's direct argument is therefore also invalid and thus refuted if we posit the first alternative interpretation<sup>2</sup>. In fact there is even another reason for refuting his direct argument if we presume the

---

<sup>2</sup> The specific conception of truth is a generic principle of which claim C is just one concrete instance. Therefore it might seem that the problem can be solved if we agree to only accept instance C of the general

first alternative interpretation. According to this interpretation Cuneo's direct argument clearly relies on P2. This is highly problematic because Cuneo does not provide an argument for P2 in his book.

### **7. Refuting Cuneo's direct argument in case of its second alternative interpretation**

Cuneo's parity premise has been interpreted in an ontological sense until now. Of course there is a very good reason for that. The parity premise is stated in purely ontological terms: if moral facts do not exist, then epistemic facts do not exist. The second alternative interpretation of the direct argument is based upon an epistemic interpretation of Cuneo's parity premise. According to this alternative interpretation, the epistemic variant of Cuneo's parity premise follows from premises P1, P2 and P3. What does it mean to interpret the parity premise in an epistemic sense? It means that we should read Cuneo's parity premise as follows: 'If there exist a valid objection against the existence of moral facts, than there also exists a valid objection against the existence of epistemic facts'.

It is not difficult to demonstrate that the epistemic variant of the parity premise indeed follows from P1, P2 and P3. I will show that now. Let  $o$  in  $O$  be a valid objection against the existence of moral facts. P2 implies that  $o$  in  $O$  is also an element of  $SO$ . From P1 we infer that there exists an  $x$  in  $OF$  such that  $f(x)=o$ . Since  $f(x)$  is valid it follows from P3 that  $g(x)$  is valid. Hence there indeed exists a valid objection against the existence of epistemic facts. From this we conclude that Cuneo's direct argument is indeed valid if we posit the second alternative interpretation. Should we therefore conclude that Cuneo's direct argument can be accepted as long as we stick to the second alternative interpretation? The answer to this question is also negative. The direct argument is also refuted if we posit the second alternative interpretation as described in this section. There are two reasons for this.

First of all the epistemic variant of the parity premise that is established by Cuneo's direct argument if we posit the second alternative interpretation is useless to infer moral realism. This variant of the parity premise asserts the following: 'If there exist a valid objection against the existence of moral facts, than there exists a valid objection against the existence of epistemic facts'. How would this premise help to deduce that moral realism is true? The second premise of Cuneo's core argument states that epistemic facts exist. This second premise implies that there does in fact not exist a valid objection against the existence of epistemic facts. From the epistemic variant of the parity premise we can infer that there does not exist a valid objection against the existence of moral facts. This means that there does not exist a valid argument for the claim that moral facts do not exist. From this we can however not conclude that moral facts do exist. We could only infer this if we invoke the earlier mentioned specific conception of truth. This is however not possible since as explained earlier this conception of truth clearly conflicts with Cuneo's assumption that all epistemic conceptions of truth are false. Hence the epistemic variant of the parity premise is indeed useless to infer moral realism.

Second, Cuneo's direct argument relies clearly upon premise P2 according to the second alternative interpretation as well. As stated in the previous section this is highly problematic because Cuneo does in fact not provide an argument for P2 in his book. Premise P2 therefore remains unsubstantiated.

### **8. Conclusion**

We have demonstrated that Cuneo's direct argument for his parity premise is invalid and thus refuted if we presume the interpretation as outlined in section 4 and 5. We demonstrated that Cuneo's direct

---

principle. Only accepting C does not require us to accept the generic claim that for every truth, there is a valid argument for it. Cuneo's direct argument would in that case be interpreted as a simple, straightforward and correct deduction of the parity premise from the premises P1, P2, P3 and C. However, this interpretation of the direct argument has to be refuted as well since Cuneo does not provide an argument for accepting C in his book. Such an argument would have to rely heavily on specific features of the moral realm. It's hard to imagine which properties of the moral realm could help to provide an argument for C. This does however not imply that such features don't exist.

argument is refuted as well if we accept either the first or second alternative interpretation as outlined in section 6 and 7. Hence we can conclude that Cuneo's direct argument for the parity premise is refuted for all three interpretations. There does not seem to be another sensible interpretation of the direct argument that is consistent with Cuneo's defence of paradigmatic moral realism as presented in his book. We should therefore reject Cuneo's direct argument for his parity premise. Hence the core argument of Cuneo for his moral realism is refuted as well and must for this reason also be rejected.

**Literature**

1. Cuneo, T, *The Normative Web, An argument for moral realism*, Oxford University Press, 2007