DISCUSSION NOTE

MORAL FIXED POINTS AND CONCEPTUAL DEFICIENCY: REPLY TO INGRAM (2015)

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Moral Fixed Points and Conceptual Deficiency:
Reply to Ingram (2015)
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I n a recent paper, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) argued that there are moral conceptual truths that are substantive and non-vacuous in content, what they called "moral fixed points." Here are some of the examples of moral conceptual truths that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014: 405) offer:

- It is *pro tanto* wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person.
- 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.
- If acting justly is costless, then, *ceteris paribus*, one should act justly.

According to their broadly Fregean, essentialist theory of concepts, the moral fixed points are conceptual truths in virtue of the semantic relation of satisfaction necessarily obtaining among the essences of the involved constituent concepts. That is, in the case of moral conceptual truths (i.e., "X is F") the essence of the moral property the predicate F picks out necessarily satisfies the essence of the subject X and applies to its substantive content. It could not be the case, metaphysically speaking, that something is X but not F (i.e., torturing of kids for fun but not *pro tanto* wrong).[1]

If the moral proposition "torturing kids for fun is *pro tanto* wrong" is such a conceptual truth, it is because the essence of "wrong" necessarily satisfies and applies to the substantive content of "torturing kids for fun." If some fail to acknowledge this much, they are somehow conceptually deficient with "wrong." Perhaps they are confused, or do not understand the proper meaning of "wrong" and what it implies. Thus, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau have indicated that error theorists who fail to accept such truths are likely to be conceptually deficient with regard to moral concepts.

Ingram (2015), however, has argued against the implication of conceptual deficiency. He thinks that it offers a reductio against the moral fixed points proposal and, therefore, the theory fails.

1. Ingram's (2015) Argument From Conceptual Deficiency

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[1] The view of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) is akin to the moderate rationalist theory of a priori justification that Bonjour (1998) has defended. Compare Bonjour (1998: 102): "The sentence in question is necessarily true because it expresses a necessary relation between certain properties, and it is of course in virtue of its meaning that it does this." A similar view of a priori *moral* justification can be found in Huemer (2008, ch. 5) and Swinburne (2015). For a proponent of both a priori justification and a priori moral justification see Peacocke (2004, chs. 6-7). For a general defense of a priori intuition, see Bealer (1998) and for a priori moral intuition, Audi (2015).

Ingram (2015: 2) observes that the Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) moral fixed points proposal is *conditional* on the conceptual deficiency claim: if there are moral fixed points, then error theorists who fail to acknowledge them are conceptually deficient in regard to moral concepts. But where Cuneo and Shafer-Landau see a *modus ponens* because they affirm the existence of moral fixed points and the entailed conceptual deficiency, Ingram (2015: 2-4) sees a *modus tollens* and rejects the moral fixed points. According to Ingram, there is no conceptual deficiency and, therefore, no moral fixed points. Here is a reconstruction of Ingram's "argument from conceptual deficiency":

> P1: If there are moral fixed points, then error theorists who deny them are conceptually deficient
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> P2: If error theorists are conceptually deficient, then they fail to grasp what their moral concepts imply.
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> P3: If error theorists fail to grasp what their concepts imply, it is because of what Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014: 438) call "suspect philosophical methodology."
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> P4: If conceptual deficiency is the result of suspect philosophical methodology, it is because error theorists reject strongly evident propositions by appeal to sophisticated but eventually unsound arguments.
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> P5 (denying the consequents of P3-P4): It is neither the case that the sophisticated arguments of the error theorists are clearly unsound nor that something is especially suspect with the error theorists' philosophical methodology.
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> C: By *modus tollens*, there is no moral conceptual deficiency on behalf of error theorists and by consequence there are no moral fixed points.

P1-P4 premises may be attributed to Cuneo and Shafer Landau (2014) with some justification and should be granted. The crucial premise for Ingram's argument is clearly P5 because it turns Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's *modus ponens* to a *modus tollens*. In particular, Ingram (2015) argues that the error-theoretical arguments are neither clearly unsound nor suspect in their philosophical methodology. As he argues (2015: 4), the error-theoretic methodology is standard philosophical methodology where, roughly, first (realist) pretheoretical intuitions are scrutinized, tested and revised in virtue of further (antirealist) evidence/arguments that undermine them (and these arguments are of at least some plausibility). Therefore, there are no moral fixed points.

2. A Sketch of a Virtue-Theoretic Account of Conceptual Deficiency

Ingram's (2015) argument is interesting, but there is definitely room for reasonable doubt about its soundness. I raise two preliminary concerns and a third, more substantive concern. First, as Killoren (2016: 166) also observes, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014: 407-8) offer four independent reasons (necessity status, framework status, denial evokes bewilderment, a

priori status) to think that there are moral fixed points and Ingram (2015) neither disputes these four reasons nor offers any alternative, abductive explanation of these four "marks" of conceptual truths.[2]

This is not to imply that such an alternative explanation is not to be had, but it is to imply that it should be supplied if the argument from conceptual deficiency is not to be weakened. That is, unless Ingram offers an alternative abductive explanation (at least as explanatorily fruitful as the moral fixed points proposal), the conclusion that there are no moral fixed points conflicts with the fact that the fixed points proposal explains in a powerful manner some otherwise unexplained facts. If so, perhaps then we should postulate the fixed points to do the required explanatory work.

Second, suppose that an alternative abductive explanation of the four marks of conceptual truths is offered that assuages the above worry.[3] Ingram (2015: 3) could then point out that the fact that *actual* conceptual deficiency is left "unsubstantiated" it is what is "fundamentally problematic" with the moral fixed points proposal because it leaves the proposal "ad hoc." The problem now, Ingram notes, is that on closer inspection error theorists are not actually conceptually deficient. Thus, P5 is true, P1-P4 are true even by Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's lights and, therefore, the argument is sound. There are no moral fixed points.

Ingram's (2015) argument, however, could still be unsound (at least from the nonnaturalist perspective, which is not obviously false). The argument could be unsound because there is a clear way that the P3-P4 claim about "suspect philosophical methodology" might be embellished to indirectly support Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's case for the reality of *actual* conceptual deficiency. This would also undermine Ingram's P5 and his criticism of "suspect philosophical methodology" as providing inadequate support to actual conceptual deficiency.

What Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) might (and could) mean with suspect philosophical methodology is something more nuanced than what Ingram allows. They might (and could) mean that error theorists are relying on *strong methodological and ontological-reductionist naturalism* that prizes the value of ontological parsimony (and debunking explanations) over and above the value of vindicating explanations that save ordinary normative phenomena and intuitions (objectivity, truth, categorical reasons, etc.).[4]

Such a methodology might be, indeed, suspect because, arguably, if we allowed for a less strong methodological and ontological naturalism (that is still a thorough naturalism worthy of its name) we could offer non-question-begging, vindicating explanations that save in a realist fash-

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[2] Also note that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, § 6) argue that the moral fixed points proposal can account for various challenges to moral realism, such as moral disagreement, supervenience and evolutionary debunking arguments. If they are right about this explanatory fruit, then this is more evidence that the moral fixed points theory is justified.

[3] See Evers and Streumer (2016: 4, n. 9) for how such an alternative explanation could go.

[4] See Papineau (2015) for discussion of methodological and ontological naturalism.

ion normative phenomena.[5] So there might be something more nuanced in the worry of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) about error-theoretic methodology that may indirectly support the case for actual conceptual deficiency.

Third, it is true that the tentative account of conceptual deficiency that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) describe needs to be more nuanced if it is to meet the Ingram challenge and have some appeal in error-theoretic circles that assign a low prior probability to moral nonnaturalism (on independent grounds). But we should not hasten to conclude that such an account is not to be had. I have no space to pursue this at length, but here is a first stab toward a virtue-theoretic approach that also helps explain what we may call *differential conceptual moral mastery*.[6]

Suppose that an agent fails to acknowledge the intuitive conceptual truth that "torturing kids for fun is *pro tanto* wrong" (assuming that it is a moral fixed point). According to the proposal, she is conceptually deficient to some extent. A virtue-theoretic explanation is prima facie available of conceptual deficiency: perhaps she has certain vicious character traits that dispose for missing the moral conceptual truth.[7] Perhaps she is mean, callous, sadistic, egocentric, cold-hearted, etc. and this induces some conceptual deficiency and moral blindness of sorts.[8] So we could, in

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[5] See Shafer-Landau (2003: 64), Das (2016: 418-19, n. 3), Wedgwood (2007) and Heathwood (2015) for how non-reductive naturalism is compatible with nonnaturalism. Also, recent debates in meta-ontology have suggested that the strong ontological naturalism of the tradition of Carnap and Quine is not as popular as it used to be. See Schaffer (2009) for discussion of the point, a critical reaction and a proposal for a neo-Aristotelian meta-ontological framework.

[6] It should be noted that the outlined framework of a response to the conceptual deficiency argument need not be virtue-theoretic. It could, in principle, work and apply to the conceptual deficiency argument even without the virtue-theoretic gloss. Still, to my mind, the virtue-theoretic gloss helps explain differential conceptual mastery. It is because of virtuous or vicious character traits that we are disposed to, respectively, discern or miss a moral conceptual truth. Audi (2015: 67-69), who independently discusses the conceptual deficiency concern in terms of what he calls the "intuitionist's dilemma," outlines a response that squares with the one offered here without a direct appeal to virtue theory. But he (2015: 68) indirectly introduces talk of "conscientiousness" and "epistemic virtues" as part of his response, so it remains unclear whether his response is not, broadly speaking, virtue-theoretic. Be that as it may, if some are inclined to think of the virtue-theoretic gloss as more of liability than an attraction, this could be easily removed. Thanks to an anonymous referee who raised the concern.

[7] According to some philosophers, psychologists and psychiatrists, psychopaths do not understand the meaning of moral concepts as psychologically normal agents typically do. A morally loaded "thick" concept like "rape" or "kill" may be cognitively processed just like the morally (and affectively) neutral "table" or "tree" (cf. Hare (1993), Schramme (2014), Prinz (2007) and Setiya (2012: 143, n. 22). This opens the conceptual possibility that psychopaths do not really possess at least some moral concepts. Also, the widely accepted "Hare psychopathy checklist" suggests that we diagnose psychopathy on the basis of character traits and, therefore, it is consonant with the virtue-theoretic explanation of moral conceptual deficiency we sketch. This is, I take it, some evidence in favor of the virtue-theoretic approach to moral conceptual deficiency.

[8] The idea that moral knowledge, broadly construed, is somehow intimately related with moral character is of course not new. It goes at least back to Aristotle's virtue theory and his notion of *phronesis* (i.e., practical wisdom) out of a virtuous character. See also Audi (1997) for the connection between character and moral knowledge.

principle, explain differential conceptual mastery of moral concepts by appeal to a virtue-theoretic explanation. Virtuous character traits dispose for conceptual mastery of moral concepts and vicious traits for conceptual deficiency of moral concepts.

At first sight, the obvious rejoinder is that this virtue-theoretic approach implies the rather unfair (if not ad hominem) accusation that error theorists are quite vicious because they fail to grasp moral conceptual truths. But this worry is unfounded. First, the relevant moral judgments are all at the first-order, normative level while the antirealist stories have to do with the higher-order level of meta-normative analysis. Error theorists intuitively grasp moral fixed points (they are not psychopaths, depressed, vicious, etc.), but reflectively resist the realist metaethical account of this intuitiveness for an antirealist one (on the basis of independent arguments).⁹ They thereby *intuitively* grasp such truths, but *reflectively* resist acknowledgement.¹⁰

Given that, typically, error theorists do find such candidate fixed points intuitive, we may wonder whether a more accurate characterization is that they are not actually conceptually deficient, but are *meta*-conceptually deficient. Perhaps they are disposed to intuitively grasp such propositions for what they are, namely, fixed points but theoretical considerations force them to resist acknowledging them as such. If that is the case, error theorists are not conceptually deficient because their moral conceptual mastery is competent enough to reliably grasp moral conceptual truths. But intuitive grasp is one thing, theoretical acknowledgement another.¹¹ This leads to a related point.

Second, we are all a bit less virtuous than desired but some are not sufficiently virtuous *in the relevant intellectual respects* to acknowledge the re-

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⁹ In corroboration of this claim, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014: 407) quote Street (2016: 32), a prominent antirealist, writing that "it seems 'almost crazy' to deny that slaughtering a young baby right before her captive mother's eyes is wrong."

¹⁰ The bifurcation of the error theorist's cognitive processing of moral fixed points between the almost automatic intuitive reaction (System 1) and the more effortful reflective resistance (System 2) could be naturally understood in terms of dual-processing theory (cf. Kahneman (2011)). As Kahneman (2011: 277) notes, the processing of reflective System 2 is often corrective of the almost automatic processing of intuitive System 1, but not always. The idea here is that the error theorist's reflective resistance of intuitive moral fixed points is one of those cases where intuition is reliable and reflection unreliable. Kahneman (2011: 277) calls this phenomenon "theory-induced blindness."

¹¹ The psychological condition described could, in principle, be explained in terms of a violation of the KK (i.e., know that you know) principle. Perhaps error theorists grasp and know the moral fixed points via intuition, but do not know that they know them because of reflective resistance due to an antirealist metaethical story. This is not to imply that the KK principle is, or should be, generally accepted as a condition on knowledge. Besides, epistemic externalists tend to be skeptical of the principle as a condition on knowledge (cf. Williamson (2000, ch.5)). But even if epistemic externalists are right to be skeptical of the principle as a condition on knowledge in general, it is more plausible to be a condition on reflective, higher-order knowledge that we are here interested in. That is, error theorists are (meta-)conceptually deficient and do not reflectively know "moral fixed points" because they do not acknowledge that they first-order know "moral fixed points." Hence, they violate the KK principle in regard to reflective knowledge of "moral fixed points" and they do not reflectively know them.

ality of moral conceptual truths. Again, this is not to imply that error theorists are particularly morally vicious or bad persons. They might, and perhaps often are, better persons than realists (in some antirealist moral sense of "better" that the error theorist should specify, at any rate).

This is indicated by the fact that they intuitively grasp moral fixed points (they are not psychopaths or vicious), although they resist metaethical acknowledgement of the moral fixed points. It is just that they are convinced by unsound arguments and perhaps blinded by intellectual vices (such as a stubborn and narrow-minded insistence on the suspect philosophical methodology of strong reductionist naturalism that values ontological parsimony over and above the value of saving phenomena) and this induces a kind of meta-conceptual deficiency.[12] Accordingly, they are the victims of what is sometimes called "theory-induced blindness" (cf. Kahneman (2011: 277)).[13]

A detailed account of actual conceptual deficiency would require a paper of its own, with excursions to work on dual-processing theory (see n. 10, 11), psychiatry (see n. 7) and normative virtue theory (see ns. 8, 12), but we have shown a way that actual conceptual deficiency could be substantiated and explained and this suffices for current purposes.

I conclude that the Ingram argument from conceptual deficiency does not defeat the Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) argument for the moral fixed points. It conflicts with the fact that the proposal is explana-

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[12] Recent work in epistemology has shown a growing interest in responsibilist virtue epistemology (cf. Zagzebski (1996), Roberts and Woods (2007), Baehr (2012)). Such epistemologists offer detailed analyses of intellectual virtues and vices, such as open-mindedness and narrow-mindedness. So, the account of conceptual deficiency on offer here is not only coherent with results from cognitive psychology (cf. Kahneman (2011)), forensic psychology and psychiatry (cf. Hare (1993)), but with results from a popular strand of normative epistemology as well.

[13] What has been argued, notwithstanding, it might still appear bizarre that as linguistically competent agents as error theorists could be conceptually deficient. In fact, a Moorean argument against the argument of the paper could be run: it is more plausible that error theorists are not conceptually deficient (because they are linguistically very competent) than that they are conceptually deficient on the basis of the provided argument. In response, error theorists are, indeed, linguistically competent and not conceptually deficient but the argument we have provided explains why they are still meta-conceptually deficient in a way that is compatible with the moral fixed points proposal. They can grasp moral fixed points (they are not vicious, etc.) and use and apply moral concepts reliably, even though they reflectively resist that there are moral fixed points.

The psychological phenomenon described is not as outlandish as it might appear at first sight. Hume suggested it in his famous response to inductive skepticism. That is, he suggested that we may be disposed to believe that we know intuitive inductive generalizations but on reflection could resist them. In Humean spirit, skeptical invariantists suggest that we may be disposed to believe we know a lot, but on reflection resist that we know a lot (cf. Kyriacou (forthcoming)). The phenomenon is even accepted by prominent error theorists, such as Olson (2014: 192-94). Olson (2014: 194) grants that "it is possible to have an occurrent belief that p [i.e., a moral fact] and a disposition to believe not-p [i.e., that it is not a moral fact] in reflective and detached contexts." This is how one can coherently be what he calls a "moral conservationist" error theorist. As we have noted, the phenomenon is also coherent with the empirically well-justified theory of cognition of dual processing (cf. Kahneman (2011)). Thanks to an anonymous referee who raised the concern.

torily fruitful and a serious case can be made that it is unsound because P5 could be false. P5 could be false because this is indirectly supported by a suspect philosophical methodology (at least as seen from a nonnaturalist perspective, which is not obviously false) and directly supported by a virtue-theoretic account of (meta-)conceptual deficiency.[14]

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