

WHY COMPANIONS IN GUILT ARGUMENTS WON'T WORK

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One recently popular strategy for avoiding the moral error theory is via a 'companions in guilt' argument. I focus on those recently popular arguments that take epistemic facts as a companion in guilt for moral facts. I claim that there is an internal tension between the two main premises of these arguments. It is a consequence of this that either the soundness or the dialectical force of the companions in guilt argument is undermined. I defend this claim via (i) analogy with philosophical debates concerning the indispensability of mathematical objects to natural science, and (ii) discussion of the 'entanglement' of epistemic concepts and moral concepts in deliberation. I conclude by proposing a positive view of what kind of argument must be used if moral error theories are to be successfully undermined.

Keywords: companions in guilt, moral reasons, epistemic reasons, error theory, categorical reasons.

According to moral error theorists (e.g., Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001; Olson 2011a; Streumer 2013), there are no moral facts. It is a consequence of this, they claim, that all moral judgments are false.¹ This radical thesis follows from two independently plausible premises. The first premise is that moral facts possess a particular 'conceptual profile'—typically, that they are categorically normative.² The second premise is that no entities with this conceptual profile exist. One recently popular strategy for avoiding this radical thesis is a 'companions in guilt' argument (e.g., Mackie 1977; Lillehammer 2007). The argument proceeds by identifying some non-moral facts that both (i) share the (problematic) conceptual profile of moral facts in relevant respects and (ii) *can* be shown to exist. Identifying facts of this kind would defuse the argument for the moral error theory. If some facts with the same conceptual profile as moral facts exist, then we shouldn't deny that moral facts exist on the basis of *their* conceptual profile either.

¹ The conclusion follows only if moral non-cognitivism (e.g., Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 1990) is false. I assume that it is.

² That is, they obtain independently of the desires, aims, or goals of particular agents.

The trick is to find the right companion. Epistemic facts—normative facts about the relation of one’s beliefs to one’s evidence—are the most promising candidate. There are two reasons for this. First, unlike other candidate companions—for example, mathematical facts (e.g., Lear 1983) or colour facts (McDowell 1984)—epistemic facts appear to share the problematic categorically normative conceptual profile of moral facts. Secondly, an epistemic error theory is often thought to be self-defeating or otherwise sufficiently unattractive to warrant rejection. It is for good reasons, then, that companions in guilt arguments based on epistemic facts have been popular in the recent literature (e.g., Stratton-Lake 2002; Shafer-Landau 2003, p. 113; Cuneo 2007; Rowland 2013). However, I argue that the companions in guilt argument will not, indeed cannot, succeed.

In Section I, I clarify the companions in guilt argument and the structure of my challenge to it. In Section II, I present the challenge in detail. In Section III, I respond to objections, and consider an interesting analogy with the philosophy of mathematics. In Section IV, I conclude.

I. THE COMPANIONS IN GUILT ARGUMENT

As I’ll understand it, the companions in guilt argument has two key premises. According to the first premise, epistemic facts share the problematic profile of moral facts, such that: if the arguments for the moral error theory (whatever they may be) are sufficient to establish that the moral error theory is true, then those arguments (or appropriate analogues of them) are also sufficient to establish that the epistemic error theory is true. I’ll call this the parity premise.³ According to the second premise, the epistemic error theory is false. I’ll call this the epistemic existence premise. It follows from these premises that the arguments used to support the moral error theory aren’t sufficient to establish that the moral error theory is true. We can represent this—the companions in guilt argument—as follows.

1. *Parity premise*: if the arguments for the moral error theory are sufficient to establish its truth, then those arguments (or appropriate analogues of them) are also sufficient to establish the truth of the epistemic error theory.
2. *Epistemic existence premise*: the epistemic error theory is false.
3. So, the arguments for the moral error theory are not sufficient to establish that the moral error theory is true.

Before defending each of the premises in turn, it will be useful to begin by demonstrating how this argument works in an example case. Moral error

³ Following Cuneo, though his formulation differs from mine. I address some of the reasons for this in dealing with objections below.

theorists often argue for their view with reference to the categorical normativity of moral facts. According to this argument: (i) moral facts are, as a conceptual matter, categorically normative; (ii) there are no categorically normative facts; and so (iii) the moral error theory is true. The companions in guilt argument is sometimes used in responding to this argument for the moral error theory. The first step is a specific application of the parity premise. It is that if the argument for the moral error theory in (i)–(iii) is sufficient to establish the moral error theory, then it is also sufficient to establish the epistemic error theory. This is warranted because (I'll assume for present) epistemic facts, like moral facts, are categorically normative.⁴ This structure is well illustrated in Richard Rowland's recent formulation of the companions in guilt argument (Rowland 2013). The 'first step' is stated as follows.

'(1) According to the moral error theory, there are no categorical normative reasons. (2) If there are no categorical normative reasons, then there are no epistemic reasons for belief.'⁵

The second step is to assert the epistemic existence premise. As Rowland puts it:

'(3) [T]here are epistemic reasons for belief.'⁶

From (3)—assuming it to be true—it follows that the categorical normativity of epistemic facts isn't sufficient to establish the epistemic error theory. And so, the categorical normativity of moral facts isn't sufficient to establish a moral error theory either. As Rowland puts it:

'(4) So there are categorical normative reasons (2, 3).

(5) So the error theory is false (1, 4).'

Rowland's argument nicely illustrates how the companions in guilt argument is intended to work in response to a specific argument for the moral error theory [i.e., (i)–(iii)]. With this in mind, we can now provide a more general defence of the premises of the companions in guilt argument.

Begin with the parity premise. The parity premise is appealing in part because the feature of moral facts that most commonly animates arguments for moral error theories—namely, categorical normativity—appears to be shared by moral facts and epistemic facts. This is clear in Rowland's argument. It is not, however, the only such motivation for moral error theorists.⁷ Moral error theorists have also been motivated by concerns with, for example,

⁴ This claim is defended in Kelly (2003). I assume it to be true, but see, e.g., Finlay (2008) and Steglich-Petersen (2011) for rejection of the categoricity of moral and epistemic reasons, respectively.

⁵ Compare (especially) Stratton-Lake (*ibid.*).

⁶ Compare premise 2 of Cuneo's (2007) 'Master Argument'.

⁷ It may, however, be the most important motivation. I address the specific, solely categorical normativity-based, version of the companions in guilt argument again in dealing with objections below.

disagreement, explanatory dispensability, supervenience and reduction, and motivation to name a few.⁸ So, satisfactorily defusing the moral error theory by appealing to the companionship of epistemic facts may (in some cases) require showing that some or all of these features are also shared by epistemic facts. Terence Cuneo has recently defended this; epistemic facts do seem to share these further problematic features of moral facts (concerning disagreement, explanatory dispensability, supervenience and reduction, and motivation.)⁹ I propose to concede this. I concede that all of these problematic features that have motivated moral error theorists are indeed shared by both moral facts and epistemic facts.

There is also a good reason to think that the epistemic existence premise is true. This is because the denial of this premise entails the truth of the epistemic error theory—a view that is often thought to be either self-defeating or otherwise sufficiently unattractive to warrant rejection.¹⁰ One may attempt to deny these claims. I propose to concede them too. Even with these concessions in place, however, I still reject the companions in guilt argument. Indeed, I don't think that it *could possibly* work.

The basic problem is that there is a tension between the arguments typically offered for the epistemic existence premise and the parity premise. Specifically, the arguments typically offered for the epistemic existence premise undermine the parity premise.¹¹ I'll call this the *objection from disparity*. I illustrate it below. This is the basic problem. But there is a complication. There are *some* arguments for the epistemic existence premise that do not undermine the parity premise. These arguments face a new problem: they render the companions in guilt argument dialectically redundant. I'll call this the *objection from redundancy*. I illustrate it below. The result is a dilemma for proponents of the companions in guilt argument. Either (a) the objection from disparity undermines the parity premise and hence the companions in guilt argument or (b) the objection from redundancy renders the companions in guilt argument dialectically redundant. This is why the companions in guilt argument won't work.

⁸ Some or all of these arguments are present in Mackie (1977).

⁹ Cuneo offers a further defence of his version of the parity premise owing to the 'entanglement' of moral and epistemic concepts. I discuss this in dealing with objections below.

¹⁰ Though this isn't accepted by all. See, e.g., Olson (2011b) and Streumer (2013). I discuss these views further below.

¹¹ There may be further problems with the argument that I don't discuss here: see, e.g., Lenman (2008), Fletcher (2009), Heathwood (2009), and Cowie (2014). The challenge presented in this paper is, I think, more fundamental. This is because it establishes a principled reason for which the companions in guilt argument couldn't work, even if the various arguments offered by the above authors fail.

II. ARGUMENTS FOR THE EPISTEMIC EXISTENCE PREMISE

In this section, I illustrate the challenge sketched above by considering specific arguments for the epistemic existence premise. My initial focus will be on how these arguments undermine the parity premise via the objection from disparity. Begin by considering the popular line of argument in favour of the epistemic existence premise according to which its denial would be *self-defeating* (cf. Cuneo 2007, p. 118). The simplest representation of this argument is as follows.

1. If the epistemic error theory is true, then there are no epistemic reasons for belief.
2. If there are no epistemic reasons for belief, then there is no epistemic reason to believe the epistemic error theory.
3. So, either the epistemic error theory is false or there is no epistemic reason to believe it.
4. So, we should reject the epistemic error theory.
5. So, the epistemic existence premise is true.

I'll call this the argument from self-defeat; it establishes that if the epistemic error theory is true, then it is 'self-defeating' in that one has no reason to believe it. As it happens, I don't think that this argument does establish the epistemic existence premise. This is because the lack of reason to believe a theory doesn't entail its falsity (e.g., Olson 2011b; Streumer 2013). But suppose for the sake of charity (to the proponent of the companions in guilt argument) that this objection misses its mark. Suppose that the argument from self-defeat does suffice to warrant acceptance of the epistemic existence premise. It would follow, I'll now claim, that we should reject the parity premise. This is an instance of the objection from disparity mentioned above.

To see this, begin by noting that the argument from self-defeat would (if successful) show there to be a sufficient reason for rejecting the epistemic error theory. But an analogue of it certainly would not show there to be a sufficient reason for rejecting the moral error theory. This is because the moral error theory would have the consequence that there are no moral reasons. But it would not have the consequence that there are no epistemic reasons. And so, the truth of the moral error theory would be compatible with the existence of a reason to believe that theory. This disanalogy undermines the parity premise. It undermines the parity premise because it entails that there is a sufficient reason for rejecting the epistemic error theory (namely, that it is self-defeating), that is not also a sufficient reason for rejecting the moral error theory. This is an instance of what I referred to above as the objection from disparity.

A structurally identical worry can be illustrated with a second, stronger, version of the argument from self-defeat that is sometimes used to support the epistemic existence premise. According to this version of the argument:

1. If the epistemic error theory is true, then there are no epistemic reasons for belief.
2. If there are no epistemic reasons for belief, then no arguments possess the property of validity.
3. So, either the epistemic error theory is false or no argument for it is valid (and hence, sound).
4. So, we should reject the epistemic error theory.
5. So, the epistemic existence premise is true.

I'll call this the *strong argument from self-defeat* (cf. Cuneo 2007, p. 121). Much as with the argument from self-defeat, I claim that the soundness of this argument would render the parity premise susceptible to the objection from disparity. This is because the *moral* error theory is certainly *not* strongly self-defeating: the moral error theory *is* consistent with the existence of arguments for its truth. So, if it is sound, then the strong argument from self-defeat provides a sufficient reason for rejecting the epistemic error theory that is not also a sufficient reason for rejecting the moral error theory. The result is that the parity premise is undermined.

One useful way to think about how this undermines the parity premise (and the companions in guilt strategy more generally) is as follows. Both varieties of argument from self-defeat—assuming them to be sound—show that epistemic facts have a ‘special property’ that warrants the rejection of the epistemic error theory: a special property concerning the self-defeating nature of denying their existence. But, crucially, this *doesn't* entail that epistemic facts are otherwise metaphysically and epistemologically unproblematic. It merely entails that entities that possess the relevant ‘special property’ exist. And as moral reasons do not possess the relevant special property (i.e., as the denial of their existence is not self-defeating), a companions in guilt argument based on the argument from self-defeat *doesn't* support *their* existence. To see this, more clearly, consider a specific, metaphysically troublesome property that both moral reasons and epistemic reasons share—categoricity. The Arguments from Self Defeat would, if sound, be sufficient to show that some entities that possess the property of categoricity (i.e., epistemic reasons) exist. However, these arguments wouldn't thereby show that the property of categoricity is unproblematic after all. For all that the Arguments from Self Defeat show, the categoricity of epistemic reasons remains *highly* problematic: sufficiently problematic that we wouldn't be warranted in supposing facts that possess this property to exist *unless* they possess the relevant ‘special property’ (i.e., unless

denying their existence were self-defeating).¹² So, for all that the argument from self-defeat shows, the categoricity of moral reasons may still be sufficiently problematic to warrant denial of their existence. And this would be the case even if categorical epistemic reasons *can* be shown to exist.¹³

The argument becomes slightly more complex if we consider a third argument for the epistemic existence premise. According to this argument, the epistemic existence premise is true because its falsity would imply global scepticism (cf. Rowland 2013). The argument is as follows.

1. If the epistemic error theory is true, then there are no epistemic reasons for belief.
2. If there are no epistemic reasons for belief, then we are never justified in believing a proposition.
3. If we are never justified in believing a proposition, then we have no knowledge.
4. So, (1, 2, 3) if the epistemic error theory is true, then we have no knowledge.
5. But we do have some knowledge.
6. So, (4, 5) the epistemic error theory is false.
7. So, the epistemic existence premise is true.

I'll call this the argument from global scepticism; it establishes that if the epistemic error theory is true, then we have no knowledge. And whilst this doesn't immediately entail the falsity of the epistemic error theory, it does strongly support it. It strongly supports it because there are some propositions that it seems very hard to deny what we know—like, for example, that a thought is being had right now (*ibid.*).

The argument from global scepticism is really a particular instance of a more general argument. The more general argument is that the truth of the epistemic error theory entails the lack of any *epistemic merits or demerits*; any facts about justification, warrant, rationality, knowledge, epistemic reasons, and so forth (cf. Cuneo 2007, p. 119). The argument is as follows.

1. If the epistemic error theory is true, then there are no normative epistemic facts.
2. If there are no normative epistemic facts, then there are no epistemic merits or demerits.
3. So, (1, 2) if the epistemic error theory is true, then there are no epistemic merits or demerits.

¹² Of course, it may be that, when it comes to moral facts, there is some analogous 'special property' that suffices to warrant one in believing moral facts to exist. But, as I have argued above, this would constitute a direct positive argument against the moral error theory and, as such, would render the companions in guilt argument dialectically redundant.

¹³ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point. I further support this line of argument by discussing an objection at the start of Section III.

4. But there are some epistemic merits and demerits.
5. So, (3, 4) the epistemic error theory is false.
6. So, the epistemic existence premise is true.

I'll call this the *argument from epistemic merits and demerits*; it establishes that if the epistemic error theory is true, then we have no knowledge, no reasons for belief, are never justified in believing, and so on. And whilst this doesn't immediately entail the falsity of the epistemic error theory, it does very strongly support it.

There are responses that epistemic error theorists can make at this point. But suppose that these responses fail (as they must if the argument from epistemic merits and demerits is to support the epistemic existence premise).¹⁴ Suppose that the argument from epistemic merits and demerits is sufficient to warrant rejection of the epistemic error theory. What would follow? One might think that the parity premise would be undermined in another instance of the (now familiar) objection from disparity. In this case however, the argument is too quick. The objection from disparity doesn't work. This is because, plausibly, the argument from epistemic merits and demerits does have a moral analogue that warrants rejection of the moral error theory. Specifically, the lack of moral merits and demerits entailed by the moral error theory may be a sufficiently undesirable result to warrant rejection of that theory. If there are no moral merits or demerits, then there is nothing morally non-meritorious about, for example, torturing babies merely for fun. But, this is clearly false, and warrants rejection of the moral error theory (e.g., Kramer 2009; Dworkin 2011). So, the argument from epistemic merits and demerits does have a moral analogue—call it the argument from moral merits and demerits—that warrants rejection of the moral error theory. So, the argument from epistemic merits and demerits doesn't undermine the parity premise. So, the objection from disparity doesn't work in this case.

I don't think, however, that this response succeeds in salvaging the companions in guilt argument. This is because it exposes the companions in guilt argument to a second objection: the objection from redundancy. To see this,

¹⁴ Epistemic error theorists can respond by 'explaining away' the appearance of categorical epistemic merits and demerits in terms of (a) non-normative evidential support relations and (b) the aims or goals that agents have as regards their belief formation (e.g., Olson 2011b). Consider the epistemic merit of justification. According to the epistemic error theorist, the appearance of one's being justified in believing *p* could consist in one's satisfying a descriptive criterion concerning one's evidence (e.g., one's evidence for *p* sufficiently outweighs one's evidence against *p*), and in one's having some aim or goal that would be satisfied by forming one's beliefs in accordance with this descriptive standard (e.g., the aim of believing the truth). In this sense, the appearance of justification can be explained away without conceding the existence of categorically normative epistemic facts.

note that the failure of the objection from disparity in this case is premised on the following claim.

- (A) The argument from epistemic merits and demerits has a moral analogue—the argument from moral merits and demerits—that warrants rejection of the moral error theory.

The problem with this claim is that if it is true, then there is a sufficient direct argument against the moral error theory.¹⁵ Specifically, if (A) is true, then one could simply argue directly against the moral error theory as follows.

1. If the moral error theory is true, then there are no moral merits or demerits.
2. There are moral merits and demerits.
3. So, the moral error theory is false.

And if there is a sufficient direct reason given by this argument to reject the moral error theory, then the companions in guilt argument becomes dialectically redundant. It becomes dialectically redundant in that one would have a reason to accept the parity premise, and hence, the companions in guilt argument, only if one already possesses a sufficient, direct, argument for the falsity of the moral error theory. The companions in guilt argument would, then, be an idling wheel. One would be rationally required to accept its conclusion that the moral error theory is false only if one already took oneself to have a sufficient reason to accept that the moral error theory is false. This is an instance of the objection from redundancy.

One may object that the companions in guilt argument is not dialectically redundant in the following sense: it provides further reason to reject the moral error theory for (and only for) one who already rejects that theory. I concede this much. But I take it that the purpose of the companions in guilt argument is to do rather more than this; it is to provide a reason for those who don't already reject the moral error theory to reject that theory. Relative to this aim, the companions in guilt argument is dialectically redundant. And this, I take it, is the relevant aim.

I have illustrated how the arguments offered for the existence premise undermine the companions in guilt argument via the objection from disparity or the objection from redundancy. It is, I think, possible to generalize from these arguments to show that the companions in guilt argument won't work, whatever the arguments used to support the parity premise. Any instance of the companions in guilt argument will be undermined by either the objection from disparity or the objection from redundancy. We can show this by considering

¹⁵ A direct argument (in the present context) is an argument that doesn't proceed via analogy with epistemic facts.

some *arbitrary* argument, X, for the epistemic existence premise. We can show this in the following three steps.

1. Either X is sufficient to establish the epistemic existence premise or it is not. If it is not, then the epistemic existence premise (and hence, the companions in guilt argument) is insufficiently supported. So, let's assume that X is sufficient in this regard.
2. Either X has an analogue—call it X*—that provides a sufficient reason for thinking that moral facts exist or it does not. If it does not, then the parity premise (and hence the companions in guilt argument) is undermined via the objection from disparity. So, let's assume that it does have the analogue, X*.
3. X* suffices to show that moral facts exist. It thereby renders the companions in guilt argument dialectically redundant: the companions in guilt argument can succeed only if one already has a sufficient reason—from X*—to reject the moral error theory.

It seems, then, that the companions in guilt argument won't work, whatever the specific arguments used to support the epistemic existence premise. Whatever the arguments for the epistemic existence premise, the companions in guilt argument will be either unsound or dialectically redundant.

III. OBJECTIONS

I'll now consider two objections to the argument that I have offered above.

1. It might be objected that my argument misses the point of the companions in guilt argument. Suppose that some or all of the arguments for the epistemic existence premise succeed. It follows that there are some epistemic facts. And so, it follows that there are some categorical normative facts. If this is the case, then moral error theorists are wrong to deny the existence of moral facts on the basis of their categorical normativity. So the moral error theory is disarmed. How does my argument undermine this basic point?¹⁶

I have already given my basic response to this objection above. The arguments offered for rejecting the epistemic error theory—the argument from self-defeat, the strong argument from self-defeat, the argument from global scepticism, and the argument from epistemic merits and demerits—do not purport to show that the categorical nature of epistemic reasons is metaphysically and epistemologically unproblematic. Rather, they purport to show that epistemic facts have a 'special property' that warrants the rejection of that theory. For all that these arguments show, the categorical normativity of epistemic

¹⁶ This way of making the point stands out particularly clearly if we focus on the version of the companions in guilt argument in Rowland (2013) discussed above.

facts remains highly problematic: sufficiently problematic that we wouldn't be warranted in supposing them to exist *unless* they possess the relevant 'special property'.¹⁷

One way to strengthen this point is by way of an analogy. The analogy in question is with the problematic ontological status of mathematical objects and the well-known 'indispensability arguments' used in response. I'll set this out briefly before saying why it is an instructive analogy.

Consider the following problem in the philosophy of mathematics. Mathematical objects appear to be abstract (i.e., causally inefficacious). And this poses a problem for those naturalists who are inclined to deny the existence of abstracta. The problem is to account for the apparent truth of those sentences of mathematics that essentially (purport to) refer to mathematical objects. If (a) there is a *prima facie* case not to admit the existence of abstract objects, and (b) (purported) reference to mathematical objects is essential to many sentences of mathematics that we would ordinarily think true, then (c) there is a *prima facie* case to think that many of the sentences of mathematics that we would ordinarily think true are not true after all. The Quine–Putnam indispensability argument provides a means by which naturalists can respond to this problem. According to proponents of this argument, we are warranted in believing some mathematical objects to exist because those objects possess a special property that warrants their admission into the ontology. They possess the special property of being indispensable to the overall theory of cause and effect that constitutes our best total theory of the world.¹⁸ On this basis, we are warranted in believing those objects to exist.

Importantly for the analogy that I wish to draw, however, consider what Quine, Putnam, et al. *don't* conclude from the success of their argument. They *don't* conclude that the abstractness of mathematical objects isn't a problem after all and that we should have no qualms about admitting any mathematical objects, or abstracta more generally, into the ontology. On the contrary, proponents of indispensability arguments concede that their arguments only validate the existence of mathematical objects that possess the special property of indispensability to the best overall theory. And so, they concede, indispensability arguments don't validate the existence of, for example, non-constructible sets or other (likely) dispensable mathematical (or non-mathematical) abstracta (e.g., Putnam 1979, p. 346; Quine 1986, p. 400). Furthermore, it would, I take it, be obviously objectionable were proponents of indispensability arguments to do otherwise. It would be obviously objectionable were they to simply generalize

¹⁷ Of course, it may be that, when it comes to moral facts, there is some analogous 'special property' that suffices to warrant one in believing moral facts to exist. But, as I have argued above, this would constitute a direct positive argument against the moral error theory and, as such, would render the companions in guilt argument dialectically redundant.

¹⁸ I remain neutral as to whether this is true. For dissent, see, e.g., Field (1980).

from the success of their initial argument to the existence of mathematical (or non-mathematical) abstracta that don't possess the property of indispensability.¹⁹ Whilst generalizing would have the advantage of explaining the apparent truth of some sentences of the more rarefied branches of mathematics (and of other areas of thought that refer essentially to abstracta), it would be theft over honest toil. It would clearly not be a satisfactory philosophy of mathematics (or abstracta more generally).

This is instructive for thinking about the companions in guilt argument. Much as indispensability arguments validate the existence of only *some* branches of mathematics, so, the arguments for the parity premise validate the existence of only *epistemic* categorical normative facts. The analogy, set out more precisely, has three steps.

- (a) There is a *prima facie* case against the existence of mathematical objects on the basis of their causal inefficacy. Analogously, there is a *prima facie* case against the existence of epistemic facts or properties on the basis of their categorical normativity.²⁰
- (b) Nevertheless, there are some mathematical objects that possess a 'special property'—indispensability to best science—that warrants belief in their existence. Analogously, there are some categorical normative entities that (may) possess a 'special property'—the (strongly) self-defeating, or clearly false, conclusions that would follow from denying their existence—that warrants belief in their existence.
- (c) But the argument for the existence of (some) mathematical objects doesn't show that mathematical abstracta (or abstracta more generally) are, after all, unproblematic. And so, inferring the existence of mathematical objects (or other abstracta) that don't possess the 'special property' of indispensability is illegitimate and would be a case of theft over honest toil. Analogously, the argument for the existence of some categorical normative entities doesn't show that categorical normative entities are, after all, unproblematic. And so, helping oneself to the existence of categorical normative entities that don't possess the relevant 'special property' would be theft over honest toil.

So, the first objection to my argument fails.

¹⁹ It would be objectionable to simply generalize. There may, however, be further arguments for the legitimacy of generalization based on the utility of mathematics in toto for natural science (e.g., Quine 1984, p. 788; Maddy 1997). But this doesn't undermine my argument.

²⁰ It might be objected that these claims aren't perfectly analogous. The fact that a property, P, is abstract isn't, by a naturalist's lights, a reason to think that P *doesn't* exist. Rather, if P is abstract, then there is no reason to think that P *does* exist. Contrast this with the property of categorical normativity. If P is categorically normative, then this is a reason to think that it *doesn't* exist. I concede this disanalogy. But I don't take it to have any impact on my overall argument.

2. Cuneo anticipates (something like) this line of argument. He anticipates the worry that: (a) the arguments given for the epistemic existence premise support the existence of epistemic reasons, but (b) analogues of these arguments do not support the existence moral reasons, so (c) the parity premise is false. In light of this, he offers an additional argument intended to show that the arguments for the epistemic existence premise support the existence of moral reasons (and not just epistemic reasons).

According to Cuneo, one way to think about why the epistemic error theory must be false (and hence, why the epistemic existence premise must be true) is that epistemic facts are ‘indispensable to theorising’ (Cuneo 2007, p. 229). In theorizing, we presuppose the existence of (epistemic) reasons to believe certain propositions and to disbelieve others. Without this presupposition, he claims, anything recognizable as theorizing would be impossible. And given the centrality—perhaps the indispensability—of theorizing to our engagement (explanatory or otherwise) with the world, we are warranted in supposing (epistemic) reasons for belief to exist.²¹

Cuneo thinks that this argument for the epistemic existence premise can be used to warrant belief in the existence of moral facts as well as epistemic facts. It does so because, he notes, ‘theorising’ for agents like us takes place in what he refers to as ‘suboptimal epistemic conditions’, conditions in which what one’s evidence supports is not always transparent to one. In such conditions, he claims, it is necessary to make use of ‘hybrid’ epistemic-moral concepts. Such concepts are comprised of both moral and epistemic components—the examples he gives include facts about negligence, carelessness, dishonesty, undue partiality, close-mindedness, and a lack of courage. And if we are warranted in taking the properties referred to by concepts of this kind to exist, then we are warranted in taking moral facts to exist. So, we are warranted in rejecting the moral error theory. I’ll call this the *argument from hybrid facts*.²² If this argument is sound, then Cuneo has shown that the argument for the epistemic existence premise supports the existence of moral facts as well as the existence of epistemic facts. And so, it might be thought, he has shown that it is possible to avoid the problem that I have pressed against companions in guilt arguments.

²¹ Compare Enoch (2007, 2011, ch. 3). For a slightly different style of ‘transcendental argument’ for the existence of epistemic reasons for belief, see Shah (2011).

²² We can summarize the argument as follows. 1. We are warranted in taking those entities whose existence is a necessary presupposition of ordinary theorizing to exist. 2. Ordinary theorizing takes place in suboptimal epistemic conditions. 3. Commitment to the existence of hybrid epistemic-moral facts is a necessary presupposition of theorizing in suboptimal epistemic conditions. 4. So (1, 2, 3), we are warranted in taking hybrid epistemic-moral facts to exist. 5. If we are warranted in taking hybrid epistemic-moral facts to exist, then we are warranted in taking moral facts to exist. 6. So (4, 5), we are warranted in taking moral facts to exist.

There are two points to make in response to the argument from hybrid facts. The first point is that the argument is highly contestable. Almost all of its premises would require substantial support. For example, one could easily imagine epistemic error theorists denying that:

1. *epistemic reasons*, as opposed to *evidential support relations and certain aims or goals*, are an indispensable commitment of theorizing;
2. we are warranted in taking those entities that are necessary presuppositions of theorizing (let alone necessary presuppositions of theorizing *in suboptimal conditions*) to exist;
3. epistemic-moral hybrids are a *necessary* or *indispensable* presupposition of (as opposed to a *useful heuristic for*) theorizing in suboptimal conditions;
4. the existence of facts about negligence, carelessness, dishonesty, and so on entails the existence of moral facts (i.e., facts about right and wrong, obligations and prohibitions, and so on).

Even if we set these worries aside however—I think these to be very interesting questions discussion of which would require a separate paper—there is a second, more fundamental, reason that Cuneo’s argument wouldn’t avoid the problems that I have pressed against companions in guilt arguments. The problem is that Cuneo’s argument isn’t really an instance of the companions in guilt strategy (as I’m understanding it) at all. It doesn’t proceed via analogy between epistemic facts and moral facts at all. The basic structure of the companions in guilt argument—as I’ve understood it—is that moral facts and epistemic facts share similar problematic features (e.g., categorical normativity, explanatory dispensability) and so, once one admits the existence of epistemic facts, this disarms arguments for the moral error theory. The argument from hybrid facts doesn’t take this form at all, however. If the argument from hybrid facts succeeds in warranting rejection of the moral error theory, it doesn’t do so by highlighting the conceptual similarity between moral facts and epistemic facts. Indeed, the argument from hybrid facts is completely silent on the similarities or differences between the conceptual profiles of moral facts and epistemic facts. The argument from hybrid facts is really just another *direct* argument against the moral error theory: a direct argument that proceeds on the basis of the indispensability of some moral properties (specifically, those that are ‘entangled’ with epistemic properties) to theorizing.²³

I don’t think, then, that Cuneo’s argument can be used to salvage the companions in guilt argument as I have considered it. This isn’t to say that

²³ It is, of course, legitimate to call arguments of this form a species of companions in guilt argument provided one recognizes that they are a very different species of companions in guilt argument from those which I have been considering in this paper, and which is the common referent of the expression. To this end, see Lillehammer’s useful distinction between two kinds of argument—‘arguments from entailment’ and ‘arguments from analogy’—both of which he refers to as companions in guilt argument (Lillehammer 2007, ch.1).

it can't be used to show the moral error theory to be false. Perhaps it can. That depends on the status of (1)–(4) above. But it certainly doesn't salvage the companions in guilt argument.

IV. CONCLUSION

I have conceded that epistemic facts possess all of the problematic features of moral facts (e.g., categorical normativity, explanatory dispensability, etc.). I have conceded that epistemic facts exist. And I have shown that the companions in guilt argument still won't work. Indeed, I have shown that it *can't* work whether it is epistemic facts, or any other kind of fact, that serves as the companion for moral facts. This is because, owing to an internal tension in the companions in guilt argument, it is *bound to be* vulnerable to either the objection from disparity or the objection from redundancy. If my arguments are right, I have shown that rejecting the moral error theory requires a *direct* argument—an argument that doesn't proceed via analogy with non-moral facts. Perhaps such an argument can be given. I have briefed some options that I regard as promising above—the argument from moral merits and demerits and the argument from hybrid facts. But I won't defend them here.²⁴

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²⁴ I am grateful to Hallvard Lillehammer for comments on draft versions of this paper. Thanks also to Lucy Campbell, Christopher Clarke, Roderick Cowie, Alexander Greenberg, James Lenman, Alex Oliver, and anonymous referees at *The Philosophical Quarterly*.

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