# From *Moral* Fixed Points to *Epistemic* Fixed Points

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## Introduction

In a recent paper that is already gaining traction, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) argued that there are moral conceptual truths that are substantive in content, what they called “moral fixed points.”[[1]](#endnote-1) According to their essentialist theory of concepts (2014, 409–11), 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 (e.g. “Torturing kids for fun is *pro tanto* wrong”).[[2]](#endnote-2) That is, in the case of moral conceptual truths (i.e. “X is F”) the essence of the moral concept F necessarily satisfies the essence of the subject concept X and applies to its substantive content.

As a result, it could not be the case that something is X but not F (i.e. torturing of kids for fun but not *pro tanto* wrong).[[3]](#endnote-3) 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 (2014, 412–14, 438–40) have indicated that error-theorists (and other antirealists) that fail to accept such truths are likely to be conceptually deficient with regard to moral concepts.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In this paper I argue that insofar as we have some reason to postulate *moral* fixed points on the basis of explanatory value, we have equal reason to postulate *epistemic* fixed points on the same basis. To this effect, I show that the two basic reasons Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) offer in support of moral fixed points naturally carry over to epistemic fixed points. In particular, epistemic fixed points exhibit the four “marks” of conceptual truths that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau identify and can be utilised to explain and address important challenges to epistemic realism (from epistemic disagreement, epistemic supervenience, and remarkable coincidence). Moreover, postulating epistemic fixed points helps epistemic realism avoid challenges that epistemic antirealism runs into, such as that it entails epistemic self-defeat and global scepticism. I conclude that insofar as we have some reason to postulate moral fixed points on the basis of explanatory value, we have equal reason to postulate epistemic fixed points.

The paper develops as follows. In section 2 I lay out the basics of the moral fixed points proposal, as I understand it, and in sections 3 and 4 show how the same basic reasons that count in favor of postulating moral fixed points, also count in favor of postulating epistemic fixed points. In section 5 I sum up with a conclusion and some ruminations on its wider dialectical significance.

## Cuneo’s and Shafer-Landau’s (2014) Moral Fixed Points: An Outline

Some of the examples of moral fixed points that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) offer are the following:[[5]](#endnote-5)

* It is *pro tanto* wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person.
* It is *pro tanto* wrong to impose severe burdens on others simply because of their physical appearance.
* 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.
* It is *pro tanto* wrong to humiliate others simply for pleasure.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau offer a detailed argument for the existence of such “moral fixed points” that is constituted by three basic reasons. First, they suggest that postulating moral fixed points explains what they identify as four “marks” of conceptual truths: *apriority*, necessity, denial evokes bewilderment to competent speakers and framework status (2014, 407–8).[[6]](#endnote-6) So, if there are any conceptual truths at all, there could be moral conceptual truths as well. Second, they suggest that postulating moral fixed points helps address three long-standing challenges to moral realism: moral disagreement, moral supervenience and the objection from remarkable coincidence (2014, 422–31). Third, they argue that moral fixed points are resistant to a battery of objections that can be run against it, such as from conceptual deficiency, the open question argument and the “unconnected heap of duties” objection (2014, 431–40).

On the basis of the aforementioned three reasons, they conclude that the notable *overall* explanatory value of the moral fixed points supports their existence. Of course, their argument is not meant to be conclusive, not even perhaps an inference to the best explanation of the various data they adduce.[[7]](#endnote-7) Rather, they think that the three reasons they put forth jointly make a reasonable case for the moral fixed points proposal. In what follows, due to space restrictions, I show that the first two basic reasons in support of the moral fixed points naturally carry over to the epistemic case and, therefore, support epistemic fixed points as well. Unfortunately, discussion of the third reason, namely, how epistemic fixed points could be resistant to various objections (parallel to those run against the moral fixed points proposal) cannot be pursued here. It is, however, relatively easy for anyone to understand how this third reason could also be explored.

Let us set out to present the first reason constitutive of Cuneo’s and Shafer-Landau’s argument, namely, the four “marks” of conceptual truths that moral fixed points also exhibit. According to their proposal, conceptual truths (such as “actuality entails possibility”) are epistemologically *a priori*, that is, justified without any direct appeal to experience. This *a priori* justification is justification that is conferred in virtue of the essences of the constituent concepts. Understanding “actuality,” “entails,” and “possibility,” is sufficient for competent speakers to understand that “actuality entails possibility”—at least to those initiated into the meaning of these quasi-technical concepts. Conceptual truths are also metaphysically necessary in the sense that they could not have been otherwise in some other possible world. Given the essences of “actuality,” “entails” and “possibility,” it could not have been the case that “actuality does not entail possibility.”

In addition, psychologically speaking, the denial of conceptual truths tends to evoke bewilderment to competent speakers. If you try to explain to an otherwise competent speaker—initiated into these quasi-technical concepts—that “actuality does not entail possibility,” it is likely that you would receive a stare of incredibility and bewilderment in return.[[8]](#endnote-8) Finally, conceptual truths seem to have framework-status in the sense that they delimit what is permissible or appropriate concept application (e.g. we should not assert that heart transplant—which is already actual—is not possible). Thus, conceptual truths put in place standards in virtue of which someone can properly apply concepts, such as actuality and possibility.

These four marks of conceptual truths are, of course, not conclusive evidence for a proposition being a conceptual truth, but insofar as there are any conceptual truths, the marks are indicative evidence of a proposition being a conceptual truth. They are also rather uncontroversial marks of *prima facie* conceptual truths, presumably acceptable even by Quineans who are prone to deny the reality of any *ultima facie* conceptual truths and would proceed to debunk these “marks” as ultimately misguiding evidence.[[9]](#endnote-9) Quinean scepticism about conceptual truths aside, however, moral fixed points seem to exhibit these four marks of conceptual truths and this hints that insofar as there are any conceptual truths, there could be moral conceptual truths as well. Let us elaborate the point.

According to the Cuneo and Shafer-Landau broadly Fregean, essentialist theory of concepts, the moral fixed points are *a priori* known conceptual truths. That is, in the case of moral conceptual truths (i.e. “X is F”) the essence of the moral concept F 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). This much of the story explains the exemplification of the marks of *apriority* and necessity by alleged moral fixed points.

Thus, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 412–14, 438–40) have indicated that error-theorists that fail to accept such truths are likely to be conceptually deficient with regard to moral concepts.[[10]](#endnote-10) This explains the denial evokes bewilderment mark. Moral fixed points also exhibit framework-constitutive status in the sense that they delimit what is right and wrong, permissible and impermissible from the moral point of view (and concept application). If for example “torturing kids for fun is *pro tanto* wrong” is a moral fixed point, it is morally wrong to act accordingly and, therefore, it is impermissible. This explains the framework status mark. So, moral fixed points exhibit the identified four marks of conceptual truths and, therefore, have as much claim to be conceptual truths as any other.

We can now turn to the second constitutive reason of the Cuneo and Shafer-Landau argument, namely, that the proposal helps address important challenges to moral realism: from moral disagreement, remarkable coincidence and moral supervenience. Very briefly, according to the epistemological version of the challenge from moral disagreement, which is also the more acute version of the challenge, the extent of deep and persistent moral disagreement between epistemic peers *pro tanto* justifies the conclusion that there are no justified moral beliefs. If there could be justified moral beliefs, deep and persistent disagreement would at least gradually give way to convergence, but this is not observed to be happening. So, there can be no robust moral epistemology and moral realism, which is customarily committed to such a moral epistemology, is implausible.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 423) respond, first, that there is more agreement than the argument from disagreement allows and that, indeed, moral fixed points are almost universally accepted. Second, they point out that if there are moral fixed points, then this entails that those who fail to grasp them are not sufficiently competent in moral thinking and, therefore, are not epistemic peers of the realists (despite appearances). In other words, they are conceptually deficient with regard to moral concepts and what they imply. As they note (2014:424), conceptual deficiency might be “the cumulative effect of bias, prejudice, various kinds of irrationality, factual ignorance or limited imagination.” (2014, 424) Hence, moral disagreement does not *pro tanto* justify moral scepticism and, hence, does not undermine the reality of moral knowledge (and moral realism).

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 425–28) also argue that the argument from remarkable coincidence can be addressed by their proposal. Very briefly, the argument is usually propounded by genealogical debunkers (evolutionary, cultural and others) such as Harman (1975) and Street (2006) and is roughly the following. If we had a different genealogical history, there could have been very different moral beliefs considered as truths because there is a multitude of possible moral systems. Given this possibility, it would be remarkable coincidence if our moral beliefs came to reliably track and represent moral facts of the correct moral system (even if there are such facts and system).

According to Cuneo and Shafer-Landau, the argument rests on a false premise that the moral fixed points proposal exposes. The false premise is the premise that there are no “contentful conceptual constraints” (2014, 420) on what can count as a moral system (for beings like us, in worlds like us). On the contrary, the moral fixed points proposal suggests that there are contentful conceptual constraints on what can count as a moral system, which is, in effect, to deny the argument from remarkable coincidence the required premise to take off in the first place. Thus, the moral fixed points proposal addresses the remarkable coincidence objection.

The third challenge is the one from moral supervenience—what they call the “Humean Challenge”—advocated by many anti-realists in the past and recently restated in a crisp way by McPherson (2012). Very briefly again, various anti-realists have argued that non-naturalists owe us an explanation of how irreducible moral properties supervene on non-moral, natural properties. Non-naturalists usually either tacitly assumed, or explicitly appealed, to brute connections between the moral and the natural, which the antirealists thought that in reality explain nothing and leaves us with a metaphysical mystery to be dispelled.[[11]](#endnote-11)

McPherson expresses aptly this metaphysical concern about non-naturalism with what he calls the “Modest Humean Thesis”: ‘‘Commitment to brute necessary connections between discontinuous properties count significantly against a view.’’ (2012, 217) McPherson takes “discontinuous properties,” to mean that any two properties, A and B, that are neither reducible to one another, identical to one another, nor metaphysically continuous with each other are discontinuous. Given that non-naturalism is indeed committed to such brute necessary connections between discontinuous moral and natural properties, moral supervenience is typically considered by anti-realists to count seriously against the plausibility of any form of non-naturalism.

Although Cuneo and Shafer-Landau make clear that they are “deeply suspicious” of the Modest Humean constraint, they suggest that moral fixed points can address it and set the moral supervenience challenge to rest (2014, 429).[[12]](#endnote-12) As they explain, moral fixed points suggest that there are necessary connections between the essences of moral and natural concepts and if there are such connections then the supervenience challenge for non-naturalism has a relatively easy answer. There are necessary moral fixed points that are part and parcel of the fabric of reality and these fixed points by their very nature ground necessary connections between moral and natural concepts and their essences.[[13]](#endnote-13) So there are no brute, inexplicable connections between the moral and the natural because the necessary connection is explicable by means of conceptual necessity. That is, given moral fixed points, necessary connections between moral and natural essences exist, the supervenience requirement is satisfied and the mystery is dispelled.

All in all, the moral fixed points proposal indicates that the long-standing challenges from moral disagreement, moral supervenience and remarkable coincidence fail to make contact with non-naturalist realism and are therefore, if not dialectically harmless, at least not insurmountable for the non-naturalist. Given the prominence of these three antirealist arguments against non-naturalism, this seems a significant explanatory payoff of the proposal.

With the sketch of the two basic reasons that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau develop in support of the moral fixed points at hand, let us now show how we could—by parity of reasoning—support epistemic fixed points as well.

## From Moral to Epistemic Fixed Points: A Parity Argument

The contention of the paper is that the argument for the moral fixed points proposal could, in principle, be extended to support epistemic fixed points as well—and this is, perhaps, not surprising given the well-attested normative analogues between the moral and epistemic domains (e.g. categorical reasons, objectivity, motivation etc.).[[14]](#endnote-14) That is, by parity of reasoning, we could postulate epistemic fixed points that exhibit the identified four “marks” of conceptual truths, such as *apriority*, necessity, denial evokes bewilderment and framework status, and we can use the proposal to address respective challenges to epistemic realism, namely, from epistemic disagreement, epistemic supervenience and remarkable coincidence. But first a list of candidate epistemic fixed points:

* Knowledge entails truth.
* Knowledge entails epistemic justification (of some kind).
* Justified true belief does not entail knowledge.
* It is *pro tanto* epistemically rational to believe what is best epistemically justified, given relevant evidence at one’s possession.
* It is *pro tanto* epistemically irrational to believe what is epistemically unjustified, given relevant evidence at one’s possession.
* It is *pro tanto* epistemically irrational to believe what is based on wishful thinking, self-deception, doxastic akrasia, or other sorts of epistemic irrationality.
* Epistemically rational belief entails justification (of some kind).
* Epistemically rational belief entails *pro tanto* aiming at the truth/avoiding falsity.
* Epistemic justification (of some kind) is, *ceteris paribus*, truth-conducive.
* Understanding-why is *pro tanto* epistemically valuable.
* Knowledge is *pro tanto* more epistemically valuable than true belief.
* It is *pro tanto* epistemically irrational to misinform others for fun (in full awareness of the fact).
* It is *pro tanto* epistemically irrational to rely on unreliable sources of information (in full awareness of the fact).

As with the moral fixed points, a case can be made that epistemic fixed points exhibit the four marks of conceptual truths: they are *a priori* justified, metaphysically necessary, psychologically their denial tends to evoke bewilderment in competent speakers and they have framework-constitutive status for epistemic discourse and practice.

Take for example the candidate fixed point that “knowledge entails truth,” which is almost universally accepted by epistemologists as a necessary truth.[[15]](#endnote-15) It is, arguably, *a priori* justified in virtue of the essences of the constituent concepts (“knowledge,” “entails,” “truth”). It is necessary in the sense that it could not have been otherwise (for rational beings like us) in a different possible world (like ours), its denial evokes bewilderment in competent speakers—at least to those initiated to the quasi-technical philosophical concepts involved—and it is framework-constitutive of “knows” concept application (and appropriate knowledge thought and talk).

The framework-constitutive character of the epistemic fixed points is an especially important mark of *prima facie* conceptual truths because it indicates that they cannot be rationally denied. If they cannot be rationally denied and it is *pro tanto* epistemically rational to believe what is best epistemically justified, given relevant evidence at one’s possession—which is yet another candidate epistemic fixed point in our list—then we have further support for epistemic fixed points. To illustrate, take the factivity condition of knowledge, that is, “knowledge entails truth.” It could be an epistemic fixed point because, as we have seen, it exhibits the four marks of conceptual truths, and it seems irrational to deny it (and it is unclear what a rationally binding, conceptual truth it is, if it is not a fact of sorts).[[16]](#endnote-16) This can be argued for by means of a *reductio ad absurdum* that indicates that “knowledge entails truth” is a prima facie necessary and indispensable epistemic fixed point.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Suppose we assume the popular knowledge norm of assertion: we should, *ceteris paribus,* assert that p only if we know that p.[[18]](#endnote-18) For the sake of clarity, I mark the linguistically implicit operation of the knowledge norm of assertion with “(I know that).” We may understand the linguistically implicit operation of the knowledge norm of assertion as a conveyed implicature that takes the asserted proposition as a complement. For example, the assertion (I know that) “Mary is from Bristol” says that “Mary is from Bristol” but conveys via implicature (and means) that “I know that Mary is from Bristol.”

Suppose now we assert that (I know that) “knowledge does not entail truth.” It seems that we are committed to implicit epistemic self-defeat. For if the assertion is true, then intuitively we will know that is true that knowledge does not entail truth and therefore, by the same lights it will not be true that we know that knowledge does not entail truth (because, intuitively, knowledge requires truth). Hence, we land in epistemic self-defeat. Therefore, we cannot rationally assert (to know) that “knowledge does not entail truth” because intuitively the knowledge assertion itself entails truth and the upshot is epistemic self-defeat.[[19]](#endnote-19)

But for argument’s sake, let us suppose for a moment that “knowledge does not entail truth” and forget about epistemic self-defeat. Two other unpalatable implications follow. First, the supposition would allow that we can *really* know falsehoods, which is very counterintuitive. I cannot be coherently understood to (really) know that Hillary Clinton is the new president of the US, unless I am insincere, using the concept loosely, making a pun or have an implausibly revisionary, perhaps oxymoronic, understanding of “know.”

Second, it seems that nothing can be really known if the factivity condition is not satisfied and, therefore, it seems that we are saddled with global scepticism about knowledge if the factivity condition is denied. This is the case because we do not *really* know of what is non-true, that is, false. And if nothing can be known, global scepticism about knowledge follows, which seems again the wrong result because, on the one hand, it is epistemically self-defeating and, on the other hand, at least some necessary-Cartesian propositions are intuitively known. On the former, it is epistemically self-defeating to assert (that I know) that there is no knowledge. For, if there is no knowledge we have good reason to deny that we know that there is no knowledge and thereby good reason to retract the assertion of the claim. On the latter, I can provisionally doubt all knowledge, but—on pain of epistemic self-defeat—I cannot doubt that at least some thinking is necessary for such doubting. So, I can know that thinking is necessary for doubting.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The above *reductio* suggests that the assertion “knowledge does not entail truth” is necessarily false and, therefore, by deduction its negation “knowledge entails truth” is necessarily true. Moreover, that it is a necessary truth that “knowledge entails truth” can be supported by the fact that we cannot even universally *conditionalise* knowledge (à la Evers and Streumer 2016) without presupposing *some* knowledge. Let us explain. It seems that we can assert without incoherence that (I know that) “*If anything is knowledge*, knowledge entails truth.” This is the case because if true the assertion is an instance of knowledge, satisfies the antecedent and therefore entails the consequent, namely, that knowledge entails truth. Yet this presupposes that there is a robust knowledge relation (that entails truth) and that we have at least some knowledge, namely, of the conditional itself.

What is more, it seems that we cannot coherently assert the denial of “*If anything is knowledge*, knowledge entails truth.” We cannot rationally assert (that I know) its denial without falling into another *reductio*. For, if we assert (I know that) “It is not the case that, *if anything is knowledge*, knowledge entails truth,” this would entail that (I know that) at least some instances of knowledge do not entail truth (which as we have seen is very counterintuitive). But if we assume for the sake of the argument that some instances of knowledge do not entail truth, then we do not really know that “It is not the case that, *if anything is knowledge*, knowledge entails truth” because it could itself be one of the cases in which knowledge does not entail truth. And even if it is one of those cases, according to the factivity denier we will “know” something without being true, which seems very counterintuitive.

These difficulties can be easily resolved if we assume that it is an epistemic fixed point that “knowledge entails truth.” Given that we easily resolve complex difficulties with such a simple concession, it seems that we have good reason to accept that there is at least one epistemic fixed point (and by parity of r*eductio* reasoning, there could of course be more). So, it seems plausible that there are at least some epistemic fixed points and we can be minimally reliable in knowing them, although no doubt we are far from infallible.

The above illustration indicates that epistemic fixed points are, arguably, framework-constitutive principles that are necessary and indispensable for epistemic discourse and reasoning.[[21]](#endnote-21) If anyone plays the epistemic game, then she has to abide by these principles, if she is to play the *real* game at all. This is the case because the epistemic fixed points are principles that need to be presupposed as necessary if any proper epistemic reasoning and inquiry is to take place. They are *indispensable* principles of epistemic reasoning.

The *reductio* argument raises a number of concerns and I can afford to discuss only two here. An obvious first objection to the *reductio* argument is that it is of limited scope. That is, even if the *reductio* argument for epistemic fixed points works, it does not apply to the case of moral fixed points. This is the case because denying moral fixed points is not epistemically self-defeating in the same way that denying the factivity condition is. Perhaps we cannot rationally assert the negation of some epistemic fixed points and this indicates that they are indispensable for theoretical reasoning. But this does not seem the case with moral fixed points because *prima facie* I can coherently, without any obvious epistemic self-defeat, deny that “It is *pro tanto* wrong to torture kids for fun.” If this is right, the extension of the mark of framework-constitutive status from moral to epistemic fixed points backfires because it shows that it does not apply to the moral case in the same way.

Very briefly, the rejoinder could be that it is due to conceptual deficiency that it is not acknowledged that such a denial breaks the standards constitutive of morality, namely, the moral fixed points. It might be true that there is no equivalent epistemic self-defeat but this is because of the specifically *epistemic* nature of epistemic fixed points. Surely, we cannot rationally deny the standards constitutive and indispensable for any theoretical-epistemic reasoning (moral, scientific or other).[[22]](#endnote-22) But equally we cannot rationally deny the moral standards indispensable for practical-moral reasoning, although there is not the same kind of epistemic self-defeat. The difference in nature of the two domains explains away the intuition about the difference of the moral/epistemic fixed points in regard to rational deniability, without defeating the parity in terms of framework status between moral and epistemic fixed points.

A second objection is that the presented *reductio*-style, indispensability argument does not seem to extend and apply to all candidate epistemic fixed points in the suggested list. Perhaps it applies to some fixed points such as the factivity condition but not to others, such as that “It is *pro tanto* epistemically irrational to misinform others for fun (in full awareness of the fact).” Besides, some might advocate some form of epistemic egoism, where we should promote personal truth-acquisition and not interpersonal truth-acquisition. Perhaps we have reason to promote our own epistemic good, but have no reason to promote the epistemic good of others. If so, we can rationally deny, without incoherence, that “It is *pro tanto* epistemically irrational to misinform others for fun (in full awareness of the fact).”

The objection raises questions we cannot delve into here, but I would concede that the *reductio* argument seems to apply more clearly to some candidate epistemic fixed points than others. This concession would suffice for current purposes, which is to uphold the case for at least *some* epistemic fixed points vis-à-vis the Cuneo/Shafer-Landau case for some moral fixed points. Perhaps such concerns could be assuaged, but the scope of the paper does not allow for such an extended digression here.

Let us now move on to the second reason in support of epistemic fixed points, namely, what explanatory payoffs they might yield. Such a payoff would add more support to the epistemic fixed points proposal.

## Explanatory Payoffs: Disagreement, Remarkable Coincidence, Supervenience

As we have seen, Cuneo and Shafer-Landau use moral fixed points to address three long-standing challenges to moral realism, moral disagreement, moral supervenience and remarkable coincidence (2014, 422–31). The same style of explanatory argument could be used in support of epistemic fixed points (vis-à-vis the epistemic version of these challenges).

First, it could be used to deflect an argument from epistemic disagreement against epistemic knowledge (and realism).[[23]](#endnote-23) Like in the moral case, we could point out that just because there is deep and persistent epistemic disagreement (e.g. about climate change, the causes of the recent financial crisis, or even about epistemic normativity) it does not follow that there are no epistemic facts and epistemic knowledge. Deep and persistent disagreement might be even widespread, but this need not defeat epistemic knowledge (and epistemic realism). As in the case of moral disagreement, at first we should note the near universal acceptance among experts of the necessary status of at least some epistemic fixed points, such as the factivity condition. *A fortiori*, any residual disagreement might be due to conceptual deficiency in regard to epistemic concepts and it might be “the cumulative effect” of cognition-inhibiting factors such as confusion, bias, factual error, vice, unsound arguments et cetera. In conclusion, deep and persistent disagreement need not undermine epistemic knowledge (and realism) and epistemic fixed points help us explain how this might be the case.

Second, we can use epistemic fixed points to address remarkable coincidence with respect to epistemic facts and knowledge. The epistemic version of the remarkable coincidence argument runs as follows. If we had a different genealogical history, there could have been very different epistemic beliefs considered as truths because there is a multitude of possible epistemic systems. Given this possibility, it would be remarkable coincidence if our epistemic beliefs came to reliably track and represent epistemic facts of the correct epistemic system (even if there are such facts and systems).

The response is to deny that there is theoretical space for such wide-ranging coincidence because it seems that it could not have been the case that very different epistemic beliefs and systems could have been rationally considered as truths and the correct epistemic system (in worlds like ours, for beings like us).[[24]](#endnote-24) There are “contentful conceptual constraints” on what can count as an epistemic system and via conceptual means alone we can have access to such conceptual constraints-truths (that are framework-constitutive of epistemic rationality). As the *reductio* argument with the factivity condition has indicated, there are limits to what can be an epistemic system because there are contentful conceptual constraints that such a system must satisfy.

*A fortiori*, epistemic fixed points can help us avoid related problems with the remarkable coincidence argument that epistemic anti-realism faces, such as the so-called “self-debunking problem” for evolutionary debunking (and other genealogical debunking) and the global skepticism that inexorably ensues from such self-debunking.[[25]](#endnote-25) The self-debunking problem is the problem that the standard evolutionary debunking of normative beliefs as unjustified seems to debunk epistemic beliefs, which are also arguably normative, and this leaves genealogical debunking arguments against normative beliefs epistemically self-defeating.[[26]](#endnote-26) It leaves genealogical arguments epistemically self-defeating because if there are no justified beliefs *at all,* then genealogical arguments are themselves unjustified and we have no good reason to endorse them. And of course if there are no justified beliefs at all, then global scepticism about knowledge follows.

But if there are epistemic fixed points in virtue of which genealogical arguments can be run, then there is no self-debunking problem for genealogical arguments. There are epistemic facts-standards in virtue of which debunking arguments can be launched (without committal to epistemic self-defeat) and these are the epistemic fixed points. Of course, postulating epistemic fixed points undercuts the aspirations of anti-realists to wholesale debunk normative beliefs as unjustified, but this is a welcome implication for the normative realist. We can still, however, use genealogical reasoning to debunk some beliefs as unjustified (perhaps, as some have suggested, thermoreceptive beliefs and positive illusions beliefs)[[27]](#endnote-27) but not just any beliefs (such as epistemic or moral fixed points beliefs) and this also helps with a noted *demarcation problem* for evolutionary debunking arguments.

This is the problem of asking in virtue of what regulative metaepistemic norm evolutionary considerations render a belief justified or debunk it as unjustified.[[28]](#endnote-28) The problem is serious because it seems that, in the absence of a regulative metaepistemic norm, any appeal to evolutionary considerations in order to justify or debunk beliefs would be ad hoc. That is, it would be ad hoc because it could always be asked why we do not appeal to the same evolutionary considerations in order to justify instead of debunk some beliefs (and vice versa). Insofar as evolutionary arguments are sometimes used to debunk, and other times to justify beliefs, the adhocness concern seems potent and reasonable.

The epistemic fixed points proposal indicates that debunking arguments cannot indiscriminately apply to normative epistemic beliefs because there are at least some indispensable epistemic beliefs-truths (i.e. epistemic fixed points) for any theoretical reasoning, genealogical reasoning included. Moreover, no global scepticism about knowledge ensues from the self-debunking problem of genealogical debunking because access to basic epistemic truths, such as the fixed point of the factivity condition, is established via conceptual means alone. So, there is at least some knowledge (such as of the factivity condition) and global scepticism about knowledge is false (or at least implausible).

Third, epistemic fixed points can also help us with an account of epistemic supervenience. Although epistemic supervenience has not been as much explored as an argument against epistemic realism (as its moral counterpart has), a prospective supervenience argument against non-naturalist epistemic realism could be run.[[29]](#endnote-29) The argument would proceed in the usual way. It would challenge the non-naturalist to explain how epistemic facts and properties supervene on natural facts and properties, given that epistemic and natural properties seem to be, in McPherson’s words, “metaphysically discontinuous.”

On first sight, it would seem that the only available answer to the non-naturalist is to bite the bullet and accept that the supervenience relation is brute and *sui generis* and no further explanation is to be asked, which is only to play into the hands of the anti-realists because it leave us with a metaphysical mystery to be dispelled. In essence, the challenge boils down to a dilemma: to explain the metaphysical connection between the epistemic and the natural in a way that does not posit metaphysically mysterious brute connections or explain why brute connections are not particularly mysterious (or at any rate mysterious, but to be countenanced).

As in the moral case, we could posit necessary connections between the epistemic and the natural set up by the essences of the involved epistemic concepts, but these need not be particularly brute and inexplicable. Necessary connections might even exist between two normative-epistemic concepts as well as between a normative and a natural concept. In the case of the factivity condition, a necessary connection exists between two normative concepts, knowledge and truth. That is, the essence of truth necessarily applies to the essence of knowledge and therefore truth supervenes on knowledge. Knowledge is sufficient for truth and necessitates it and, therefore, for any proposition p, if p is known by some S, then p is true. The factivity condition is a case where two *prima facie* non-natural, normative concepts are involved in an epistemic supervenience relation.

But there could also be epistemic supervenience between epistemic and natural concepts-essences. Such a case is the candidate fixed point in our list “It is *pro tanto* epistemically irrational to believe what is produced by wishful thinking.” Epistemic (ir)rationality is a *prima facie* non-natural, epistemic concept but wishful thinking seems to be a natural, psychological concept that individuates a belief-forming process. This is, roughly, the process of forming beliefs on the basis of our mere preferences and wishes (and not on the basis of given evidence). The respective fixed point indicates that any belief produced by the process of wishful thinking is sufficient for epistemic irrationality and necessitates it because the essence of “epistemic irrationality” necessarily applies to the essence of “beliefs produced by wishful thinking.” In other words, “epistemic irrationality” supervenes on “beliefs produced by wishful thinking” in virtue of conceptual necessity.

Let us now sum up with some ruminations on the wider dialectical significance of the *prima facie* normative parity between moral and epistemic fixed points.

## Conclusion

I have argued that insofar as we have some reason to postulate moral fixed points, we have equal reason to postulate epistemic fixed points. This conclusion indicates that moral and epistemic fixed points might be “on a par” and, therefore, the respective normative “fixed points” proposals should stand or fall together. This implies that anyone who wishes to deny moral fixed points should also—by parity of reasoning—also deny epistemic fixed points and it is surely much harder to deny *both* proposals than to deny only moral fixed points.

For one thing, as our discussion of the factivity condition has shown, anyone inclined to deny the factivity condition verges on rational incoherence. The result is of dialectical importance because the *prima facie* parity between moral and epistemic fixed points further strengthens the prospect for the *overall* parity between the moral and the epistemic, which is an important premise in companions-in-guilt arguments in support of moral (and, inversely, epistemic) realism. Hence, anyone who wishes to undermine the moral-epistemic parity in general, should also venture to deny the moral-epistemic fixed points parity in particular, which is not to presume that it is either unassailable or easily undermined.[[30]](#endnote-30)

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1. See Ingram (forthcoming, 2015); Killoren (2016), Evers and Streumer (2016), Copp (2018) for critical reactions and Kyriacou (ms., 2017b) for a sympathiser to the moral fixed points proposal. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Of note, is that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 410–11) distinguish between *conceptual* truths and *analytic* truths. Conceptual truths are propositions that hold in virtue of the essences of the constituent concepts and need not have been hitherto discovered and linguistically expressed. Analytic truths are sentences that hold in virtue of the meaning of constituent words and have been hitherto discovered and linguistically expressed. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The view of Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014) has affinities with the moderate rationalist theory of *a priori* justification that Bonjour (1997) has defended. Compare Bonjour: “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”. (1997, 102) Another view of a *priori* *moral* justification can be found in Huemer (2005, chap. 5) and Swinburne (2015). For a proponent of both *a priori* justification and *a priori* moral justification, see Peacocke (2003, chaps 6–7). For a general defense of *a priori* intuition, see Bealer (1998) and for *a priori* moral intuition, Audi (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Ingram (2015) for an argument that the conceptual deficiency charge backfires and defeats the moral fixed points proposal and Kyriacou (2017b) for a reply on behalf of the moral fixed points proposal. Ingram (forthcoming) offers a rejoinder to Kyriacou (2017b). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 404) make clear that moral fixed points are truths that apply to rational beings like us, in worlds like us. They are not supposed to be absolute truths in any unrestricted sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This is not to suggest that we could not in principle explain these marks in a way more friendly to the antirealist. See Evers and Streumer (2016, 4 fn. 9) for how such an explanation could go. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 403) distinguish between two non-naturalist stories that could metaphysically invest the moral fixed points proposal: *minimal* and *robust* moral non-naturalism. Minimal moral non-naturalism asserts that “there are nonnatural moral truths, but there are no nonnatural moral properties or facts. All moral properties and facts are natural.” Robust moral non-naturalism is ontologically more permissive and asserts that “there are both nonnatural moral truths and nonnatural moral properties and facts.” They suggest that the moral fixed points proposal is compatible with both positions and that, although they “want to remain officially neutral on which of these views is true,” they favour a view of the robust style (at least something “in the spirit …if perhaps not the letter” of such a view, as they put it). As nothing of substance hinges on the distinction in this paper, I remain neutral in regard to which of the two is the more promising. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Moral (and other) fixed points need not be very obvious at first sight and might bear different degrees of self-evidence (cf. Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 2014, 413–14). Compare, for instance, the quite evident “knowledge requires truth” with Gettier’s less evident lesson, namely, “justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge.” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Juhl and Loomis (2009) for a round introduction to the Carnap-Quine debate on analyticity as well as the debate that ensued after Quine’s seminal work. Traditional conceptual analysis seems also to be making a comeback in recent debates, see Jackson (1998), Juhl and Loomis (2009) and McGinn (2012) for some defences. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Kyriacou (2017b) distinguishes between conceptual and meta-conceptual deficiency and submits that error theorists are likely to be only meta-conceptually deficient, if deficient at all. For simplicity’s sake, I will ignore the distinction for the purposes of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For some discussion of the supervenience challenge to moral non-naturalism, see Ridge (2014, sec. 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For one thing, as Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 429 fn. 66) note, Wielenberg (2014, chap. 3) has stressed that the Modest Humean Thesis appears self-defeating because it posits itself a brute connection between the discontinuous properties “entailing a brute necessary connection between discontinuous properties” and “being unreasonable to believe.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. While formulations of the moral supervenience challenge are often phrased in terms of explaining the connection between moral and natural *properties*, the moral fixed points proposal explains moral supervenience in terms of moral and natural *concepts-essences*. As far as I can see, nothing substantial hinges on this difference because the supervenience challenge calls for an explanation of the metaphysical “bridging” between the moral and the natural domain, be it in terms of properties or essences. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See Kim (1988), Chrisman (2007), Cuneo (2007), Kyriacou (2016a, 2016b, 2012), Rowland (2013), Cuneo and Kyriacou (forthcoming) for the moral-epistemic parity. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Compare Stanley: “The factivity of knowledge is not just a truth about knowledge, but a necessary truth about knowledge. That is, not only is it the case that x’s knowing that p entails that p, but it is necessarily true that if someone knows that p, then p.” (2005, 112) Hazlett (2010) has argued that the *ordinary* concept of knowledge is non-factive, although he concedes that epistemologists are probably right that the concept of knowledge is factive. For a rejoinder that defends that even the ordinary concept of knowledge is factive, see Hannon (2013). At any rate, the factivity condition is here intended to apply to the concept of knowledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Schaffer ((2009, 375) for the intuitive grounding of truth in fact. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For an appeal to an indispensability argument from practical deliberation for the existence of moral facts, see Enoch (2011, chap. 3). In essence, we present a parallel indispensability argument from theoretical deliberation-reasoning for the existence of epistemic facts. Interestingly, if knowledge is also the norm for practical reasoning, as some think (e.g. Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005; Williamson 2000), then the indispensability argument from theoretical deliberation for the existence of epistemic facts is by extension an indispensability argument from practical deliberation. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Hawthorne (2004), Stanley (2005) and Williamson (2000) for the knowledge norm of assertion. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. We should distinguish between *logical* self-defeat that implies contradiction and rebutting (e.g. the self-referential semantic paradoxes) and *epistemic* self-defeat that implies undercutting defeat (e.g. Descartes’ cogito). Both sorts of self-defeat provide us with good epistemic reason to reject propositions or arguments. See Fumerton (1995, 43–53) for some discussion of the distinction between epistemic and logical self-defeat. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See Rowland (2013) for a similar argument in a different dialectical context. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For the idea that there might be epistemic facts that are indispensable for epistemic reasoning, see Cuneo (2007, 229). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Or, maybe, we can and we should? Besides, why not be epistemic fictionalists and proceed “as if” there are such indispensable fixed points while accept that these are only epistemically useful fiction? Epistemic fictionalism raises delicate issues that we cannot pursue here but one concern for the fictionalist proposal is that normative, epistemic authority does not seem to be merely fictional. But if there is epistemic authority there must also be epistemic facts in virtue of which the authority exists and binds us. Otherwise, epistemology turns out to be relative to one’s fictionalist commitments (and these might differ widely) and is reduced to *schm*epistemology (see Kyriacou 2016a for some discussion). Unfortunately, we have to cut off the topic here. For some critical discussion of epistemic fictionalism see Cuneo (2007, chap. 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The epistemology of disagreement literature has recently paid attention to the possible skeptical implications of the “equal weight view” about peer disagreement. See Matheson and Carey (2013) for some discussion. For some more work on epistemology of disagreement see the essays in Feldman and Warfield (2010). Also, see Ahlstrom-Vij (forthcoming, sec. 5) for an appeal to disagreement about epistemic normativity in support of epistemic anti-realism. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. For the moral analogue of this argument against evolutionary genealogical debunking, see Wielenberg (2014, chap. 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For the self-debunking problem for genealogical debunkers see Kyriacou (2016a, forthcoming, 2017a), Pust (2001) and Vavova (2014). For arguments from epistemic self-defeat run against epistemic anti-realism, see Boghossian (2006) Cuneo (2007), Lynch (2009) and Rowland (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. The obvious response that epistemic beliefs are non-normative is not easy to come by. See Heathwood (2009) for an argument that epistemic reasonability beliefs are non-normative and Cuneo and Kyriacou (forthcoming) and Kyriacou (forthcoming, sec. 4) for a response. For a rejoinder, see Heathwood (this volume). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See De Cruz et al. (2011) for a possible debunking of thermoreceptive beliefs and McKay and Dennett (2009, 532) for a possible debunking of positive illusion beliefs. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For versions of this problem see the discussion in Bradie ((1990, 35–36), Kahane (2011), Shafer-Landau (2012, 35), Woods (2018, sec. 4). Shafer-Landau (2012), in particular, makes explicit that evolutionary debunking arguments about a philosophical domain quickly over-generalise to domains that seem beyond serious epistemological doubt and, therefore, we need to disambiguate the metaepistemic norm in virtue of which debunking arguments run and confer unjustifiedness. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. For some general discussion of epistemic supervenience, see Kyriacou (2016b, sec. 3) and Turri (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. I would like to thank David Enoch for helpful comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)