

Companions in guilt: entailment, analogy, and absorption

Hallvard Lillehammer

Birkbeck, University of London

Email: h.lillehammer @bbk.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I do three things. First, I say what I mean by a ‘companions in guilt’ argument in meta-ethics. Second, I distinguish between two kinds of argument within this family, which I call ‘arguments by entailment’ and ‘arguments by analogy’. Third, I explore the prospects for companions in guilt arguments by analogy. During the course of this discussion, I identify a distinctive variety of argument, which I call ‘arguments by absorption’. I argue that this variety of argument (at least in the version considered here) inherits some of the weaknesses of standard arguments by analogy and entailment without obviously adding to their strength.

In this paper, I do three things. First, I say what I mean by a ‘companions in guilt’ argument in meta-ethics. Second, I distinguish between two kinds of argument within this family, which I call ‘arguments by entailment’ and ‘arguments by analogy’. Third, I explore the prospects for companions in guilt arguments by analogy. I do so by engaging in a close reading of two examples of the type, found in Renford Bambrough’s book *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (Bambrough 1979) and Russ Shafer-Landau’s paper ‘Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism’ (Shafer-Landau 2006).¹ During the course of discussing the latter, I identify a distinctive variety of argument, which I refer to as ‘arguments by absorption’. I argue that this variety of argument (at least in the version considered here) inherits some of the weaknesses of standard arguments by analogy and

¹ Bambrough’s book is one of the most fertile sources of the ‘companions in guilt’ strategy in the relevant period. Its comparative lack of recognition has recently been mitigated by the inclusion of the chapter on ‘Proof’ in Shafer-Landau, ed. (2013)). Although briefly addressed in Lillehammer (2007), Bambrough and Shafer-Landau’s arguments did not receive the attention they deserve in that work.

entailment without obviously adding to their strength. I conclude by making some brief remarks about ethical disagreement.²

1. Companions in guilt arguments in meta-ethics

As I define them, companions in guilt arguments have three defining features. First, they are designed to support the credentials of ethical claims by comparing those claims with other claims which are said to share their allegedly problematic features, or which somehow entail the existence of these allegedly problematic features³. Second, the companion claims in question are supposed to be ones the relevant credentials of which are not comparably in doubt (in the same way, or to the same extent). Third, these arguments take the allegedly problematic features at their problematic face value. Thus, if both ethical claims and claims about human health imply the existence of value in some sense; if the credentials of claims about human health are assumed to be less problematic than the credentials of ethical claims; and if the values implied by both ethical claims and claims about human health are interpreted as *non-relative, categorical, unconditional or absolute*, then ethical claims and claims about human health are candidates for companionship in guilt. If one or more of these conditions are unsatisfied, they are not. Hence, I exclude arguments rejecting the view that

² In Lillehammer (2007) the primarily focus of discussion was the metaphysical ‘queerness’ of ethical claims. Over the last decade or so there has been a significant growth in work focused on their alleged epistemological ‘queerness’; a literature from which the discussion in that book would have benefited. (See e.g. Cuneo 2007; Enoch 2009). Although the present paper is an attempt to widen the scope of this previous discussion, I am unable to do this topic any real justice here.

³ This characterization corrects an earlier formulation in Lillehammer (2017; 2013) that would arbitrarily exclude the possibility of companion claims entailing claims that possess the allegedly problematic feature without instantiating that feature themselves. I am grateful to Chris Cowie for discussion.

the allegedly problematic features are shared (such as an argument in favour of a reductively sociobiological account of human health combined with a ‘pure’ expressivist theory of ethical claims). I also exclude arguments that compare ethical claims with claims the credentials of which are agreed to be equally problematic (such as arguments comparing ethical claims with religious claims that presuppose the existence of an infinitely powerful legislator). Third, I exclude arguments aimed to establish the credentials of ethical claims by giving a deflationary account of the allegedly problematic features they are said to share with their companion.⁴ For example, I exclude arguments that give either a descriptive, or relativist, analysis of ethical claims (e.g. arguments according to which evaluative claims are descriptions of mental states, or accounts according to which ethical values obtain only relative to some descriptively specifiable end, or standard).⁵ This is not to deny the independent interest or plausibility of any arguments thus excluded (c.f. Foot 2001). Nor is it to deny that they merit the label ‘companions in guilt argument’ (although ‘companions in innocence’ would arguably be a better label for some of them (see e.g. Joyce 2003)). Of course, the name ‘companions in guilt’ is really just a theoretical label based on a metaphor, the reasonable definition of which is a matter of stipulation, at least up to a point. The primary driver of my definition is a specific theoretical interest, namely an interest in whether or not the credentials of ethical claims can be defended while retaining an understanding of those claims on which they are agreed to possess the very features that have made them seem

⁴ This explains the absence from Lillehammer (2007) of any discussion of one subset of arguments connecting ethical and scientific thought, namely the kind of reductive argument associated with ‘Cornell moral realism’ that interprets the semantic function of ethical claims as being to pick out clusters of reductively specifiable natural or descriptive properties. (See e.g. Brink 1989; c.f. Cuneo 2009; Lillehammer 2013).

⁵ As Richard Joyce puts it in his review of Bloomfield (2001): we don’t want to find ourselves ‘like someone... doubtful of... the existence of unicorns who had just been shown a live rhinoceros and been told “You don’t question the objective existence of *that*, so why do you persist in this doubt about unicorns?”’ (Joyce 2003, 99).

distinctively problematic. To the extent that any such argument is sound, it will add to the explanatory burden of those who believe that giving some kind of deflationary or sceptical account of ethical claims is the only way to ‘save our philosophical souls’ (c.f. Blackburn 2010).

2. *Arguments by analogy and arguments by entailment*

a) Analogy

There are at least two kinds of companions in guilt argument. The first of these I call ‘arguments by analogy’. These are arguments that seek to establish the credentials of ethical claims by showing that they *have some feature in common* with claims the credentials of which are not similarly in question. Given that they have some feature in common, it follows that there is some (possibly gerrymandered) sense in which they are of the same ‘kind’. (More of this below.) If this were enough to establish the objective credentials of ethical claims, then constructing a sound companions in guilt argument would be very easy indeed. All we would need to do is find some feature shared between ethical claims and some other claims the objective credentials of which are not similarly in doubt and then argue that as there is no problem with the objective credentials of the companion claims, we should not worry about the objective credentials of ethical claims either. Yet as it stands, this is obviously a bad strategy. More is needed for a successful companions in guilt argument by analogy.

Trivially, all things share some features with all other things. Yet not all the features of something are either central or essential to it. Furthermore, a feature that is problematic in one context need not be problematic in another. The arguments by analogy I am primarily interested in are ones that purport to support the objective credentials of ethical claims by showing that they have some *central or essential* feature in common with claims the objective credentials of which are not similarly in question, where the feature in question is one that is considered *problematic*, and where being problematic is something that feature is *across relevant contexts*. Consider the following case. Suppose I have come to believe in the existence of a type of silvery bird with gills, the average weight of which is 500 grams. Suppose I name them ‘girds’. Suppose you refuse to believe that girds exist. If I try to change your mind by offering an argument by analogy, there are at least three different ways I might fail. First, I might point to a similarity that is for present purposes accidental. (For example, that girds share their average weight of 500 grams with many familiar things in the natural world, such as certain vegetables.) Second, I might point to a similarity that is not accidental, but is not relevantly problematic. (For example, that the silvery colour of girds is shared by familiar creatures with gills, namely some of the fish in the sea.) Third, I might point to a similarity that is neither accidental nor unproblematic, but whose status as problematic does not extend across relevant contexts. (For example, that although it is rare to find a bird with gills, there are many familiar creatures in nature who also have gills, namely fish in the sea, where gills do for creatures in water what lungs do for creatures in the air.)

In the case of some arguments by analogy, the problematic feature in question is one that is considered *intrinsically* problematic, or problematic in itself, as instantiated by some claim or other. (Consider the historically much debated feature of something being the cause of itself.) In that case, the third condition (extension across contexts) is necessarily satisfied. Yet not all

features that could reasonably be considered problematic need to be intrinsically problematic, or problematic in themselves. In the case of arguments by analogy focused on such features, it is not enough to establish that the problematic features associated with ethical claims are shared by other claims the objective credentials of which are not similarly in question. (Thus, there is nothing intrinsically problematic about a living creature having gills.) It also needs to be established that the problematic features associated with ethical claims are shared by other claims the objective credentials of which are not similarly in question, and are shared by those claims in such a way as to display similar relations to other features, where it is standing in the relevant relations that makes their presence problematic in the ethical case. (Thus, although there is nothing intrinsically problematic about a creature having gills, there is something problematic about a creature having gills if it spends its entire life in the air; as opposed to under water, where the other creatures with gills normally spend their time.)⁶

Perhaps most of the arguments by analogy in the literature have been officially targeted at the possession by ethical claims of some feature that is considered intrinsically problematic (such as those ‘phantasms’ of the mind that have come to be known as ‘response dependent’ properties). While this may restrict the historical interest of the fact that arguments by

⁶ Some arguments by analogy may survive the fact that the feature considered problematic in the case of ethical claims is not comparably problematic in the case of its proposed companion. They might do so if there are examples among the companion claims of the possession of some feature that is distinctively problematic *among those other claims* in a way that is relevantly similar to the way that ethical claims possess their distinctively problematic feature, either intrinsically or extrinsically. Thus, although there is *prima facie* something problematic about the idea of birds with gills, just as there is something *prima facie* problematic about the idea of fish with lungs; there are uncontroversial cases of fish-like creatures with lungs (e.g. whales, who spend much of their time under water, but have to come up for air). Yet, there is no principled reason why there could not also be bird-like creatures with gills (e.g. birds), if even though they spend most of their time in the air, they have to dive down to filter water through their gills from time to time (e.g. as those actual breeds of flying fish presumably do). But I digress.

analogy do not have to take this form, it does not remove the theoretical interest of that fact. Thus, one problem that has been raised against some companions in guilt arguments is that they are either unsound or redundant (see e.g. Cowie 2014; 2016. For replies, see Das 2016; Rowland 2016). The possibility that not all allegedly problematic features of ethical claims are relevantly problematic *across contexts* ought to warn us against overstating the scope of this claim. If we are entitled to assume from the start that the problematic status of the relevant feature is preserved across contexts, then perhaps we may have limited use at best for companions in guilt arguments. (Yet even here, the fact that the feature in question is shared between ethical claims and their companions can be informative for those of us who fall short of philosophical omniscience.) On the other hand, if the status of the relevant features as problematic across contexts is anything less than self-evident (such as is arguably the case for the underdetermination of theory by evidence in the case of scientific predictions versus ethical prescriptions, for example (see e.g. Lillehammer 2007, Ch. 6)), an argument by analogy could in principle illuminate the issue by describing what makes these features distinctively problematic in some contexts and not others, and then locating ethical claims and their companions on the resulting map.

b) Entailment

Arguments by entailment seek to establish the credentials of ethical claims by showing that they are implied by some set of other claims the credentials of which are not comparably in question. It follows that there is a sense in which ethical claims and their companions belong to the same ‘kind’, where belonging to the relevant ‘kind’ goes beyond the mere possession of some common feature. (Thus, if some facts about sound entail facts about pitch, then

sound and pitch can be said to belong to the same sensory ‘kind’ in a way that facts about pitch and facts about hue do not; even though facts about pitch (sound/hearing) and facts about hue (colour/vision) are both ‘sensory facts’, and thus form part of some wider ‘kind’. (The significance of this distinction should become clear in what follows.)

A genuinely sound argument by entailment would establish not only the existence of some central and problematic feature shared by ethical claims and their companions, but also the genuine instantiation of those features in the case of ethical claims themselves. To this extent, one would expect that interesting and plausible arguments by entailment are comparatively harder to find than interesting and plausible arguments by analogy.⁷ Moreover (and ignorance aside), it might be worried that arguments by entailment are especially vulnerable to the aforementioned charge that they are likely to be either unsuccessful or redundant.

Yet arguments by entailment can retain their philosophical interest even in some of their less esoteric incarnations. First, even if some A claims imply B claims, it does not follow that all of them do. For example, some ‘sensory’ claims imply claims about hue, whereas others not (e.g. because they are claims about sound). Second, even if some of the A claims do entail B claims, they may not imply all of them. In the ethical case in particular, certain arguments by entailment aim to establish that some true companion claims entail at least some true ethical claims, thereby ruling out the possibility of universal scepticism about ethical claims. The following questions then arise about the subset of ethical claims that the companion claims entail: what are the characteristic features of the ethical claims that are entailed by the companion claims (e.g. are they comparatively formal?); in what respects do ethical claims

⁷ For a sample of such arguments, see Cuneo 2007; Lillehammer 2007, Chs. 2-4).

entailed by the companion claims differ from ethical claims not so entailed (e.g. are they comparatively general?); what, if any, additional premises do we need to establish these other ethical claims (e.g. do we need a supply of basic, or ‘ungrounded’, ethical claims?); and what are the credentials of these additional premises (e.g. do they ultimately rest on historical accident, social convention or arbitrary stipulation?).⁸ At least some of these questions could be of independent philosophical interest, and could therefore in principle ensure that some sound arguments by entailment are not explanatorily ‘redundant’; even for someone previously convinced of their conclusion.

Companionship in guilt by entailment entails companionship in guilt by analogy, but not vice versa. (Thus, if claims attributing mental features to things imply the existence of ethical values, then talk about mental states and ethical talk both imply the existence of ethical values. Yet if claims attributing colours to things attribute the same degree of response dependence as claims attributing ethical value, it does not follow that claims attributing colours to things imply claims attributing ethical value). The theoretical significance of this fact can be illustrated by considering the following two examples of the companions in guilt strategy at work.

⁸ The arguments of Chs. 5-7 of Lillehammer 2007 are partly targeted at these questions, and tentatively suggest that the extent to which substantial ethical claims can be inferred from their alleged companions is limited by a distinctive form of indeterminacy. For a more recent take on how to understand that notion, see Lillehammer 2018.

3) *The companions in guilt strategy at work: two case studies*

a) Analogy

An exceptionally good sample of arguments by analogy at work can be found in Renford Bambrough's *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge* (Bambrough 1979). In this book, Bambrough offers a battery of such arguments.⁹ Here is a representative sample:

- 1) *'When I say that something is good or bad or right or wrong I commit myself, and reveal something of my attitudes and feelings... This is true, but it is equally and analogously true that when I say that something is true or false... I also commit myself and reveal something about my beliefs...'* (21-22)

So: ethical claims are not distinctively problematic in giving expression to our mental states, because paradigmatically factual beliefs give expression to our mental states as well. Although Bambrough does not explicitly use the word 'express' in this passage, it is safe to assume that his main target is the view that there is something distinctively problematic about ethical claims that follows from what is sometimes called their 'expressive' character.¹⁰

⁹ There are more than just accidental parallels between the claims made in Bambrough's book and some of the claims made in John McDowell's much more influential paper, 'Virtue and Reason', also published in 1979. I am yet to establish the existence of any causal connections between the claims made by these two authors, although I would be surprised if they did not exist.

¹⁰ One of Bambrough's targets here is Hare. (See e.g. Hare 1963.) Elsewhere, Bambrough writes: 'The analogy between moral evaluation and logical evaluation is shown to be

A closely related claim, also made by Bambrough, is this:

- 2) ‘And though there is a good sense in which I may *refuse* to accept even a conclusion that is in this other [e.g. logical] sense ‘forced’ upon me, this point again applies equally to moral and to non-moral conclusions.’ (43)

So: ethical claims are not distinctive in the sense that sound arguments are not always accepted by those who go through them. Although no specific companion claims are explicitly mentioned in this passage, it is clear that Bambrough takes the point to be perfectly general, given the way he continues by saying that ‘[s]tubbornness, wilful ignorance, perversity and self-deception are not limited to any one sphere of influence’. (43)

A similar level of generality is present the following three passages:

- 3) ‘Even in mathematics and physics the possibility of presenting argument and evidence depends on shared responses between parties to the disagreement. The fabric and constitution of the human species includes the fabric and constitution of the human understanding.’ (86)

So: ethical claims are not distinctive in requiring for their mutual understanding and acceptance a set of shared responses to the world; or what is sometimes called a ‘shared sensibility’, or ‘form of life’ (c.f. McDowell 1979).

complete when we notice the involvement in logic as in ethics of the notion of *commitment*.’ (111) This is arguably one of Bambrough’s least well targeted applications of the strategy, given that how we should understand the difference between commitments expressing affective attitudes on the one hand, and commitments expressing beliefs on the other, is partly what is in dispute. For ease of exposition, I pass over this issue. For a more recent argument making a similar point to Bambrough’s, see Price 2011.

- 4) ‘In any sense in which it is true that there may or must come a point in moral enquiry beyond which no further reasoning is possible, it is in that same sense equally true that there may or must be a point in *any* enquiry at which the reasoning has to stop’
(23)

So: ethical claims share with all claims whatsoever that at some point in inquiry we reach bedrock: ‘[h]ere... the moral skeptic is partial and selective in his use of an argument of indefinitely wide scope.’ (25) Hence, the fact that our basic ethical claims have no independent foundation does not distinguish those claims as more problematic than any others. The result is that the sceptic is left with no place to stand from which to mount a contrast revealing the requisite asymmetric privilege:

- 5) ‘[T]here is no more a non-question-begging way of deductively deriving a conclusion about the validity of an argument from its form than there is a non-question-begging way of deductively deriving a conclusion about the morality of an action from a purely factual or ‘descriptive’ account of the action. It follows that if the ultimate justification of logical rules... is required to be deductive it will be just as circular or regressive as the ultimate justification of any other mode of enquiry of which the same condition is exacted.’ (109)¹¹

¹¹ Elsewhere, Bambrough writes: ‘I am saying to the sceptic about morality ‘You might as well be sceptical about logic. You might as well say that we can never know an argument to be valid.’ (145). A bit further on, he elaborates on the same point: ‘We can hold that there is an impassable gulf between an *is* and a moral *ought* only if we also hold that there is an impassable gulf between an *is* and a logical *ought*, between the description of the form of a valid argument and the endorsement of the argument as sound. If we can reject this perverse account of logic... we can no longer draw from this source any reason for scepticism about morals.’ (146)

So: the fact that basic ethical claims can only be justified in a circular manner by presupposing some of the claims to be justified does not distinguish ethical claims from logical claims. Hence, assuming that the objective credentials of logical claims are secure, the objectivity of ethical claims cannot be undermined by pointing out that they have the analogous feature. On the basis of this battery of arguments (and then some), Bambrough concludes that '[l]ogic and reason have a unitary structure in spite of the internal varieties and their manifold applications.' (121); and that '... no relevant distinction has been shown or can be shown between the conclusion that an argument is good and the conclusion that a character or an action is good.' (145). As a consequence, he argues, 'the parallels between theoretical and practical reason are so numerous and extensive that we can turn the tables on almost any argument that a sceptic about practical knowledge may adduce.' (110).¹² The general diagnosis is this: 'the sceptic's refrain is that morality is *different* – different, that is, from logic and fact, and hence... inferior to the very paradigms of rationality. I have not denied that morality is different but I have tried to show that it is not inferior.' (131).

I shall not attempt here to comprehensively evaluate the plausibility of every one of Bambrough's arguments.¹³ Instead, I make four points about the general prospects of Bambrough's strategy. First, individual applications of the strategy can be perfectly probative on their own terms, at least if they are put to what I call a 'defensive' use. Thus, if you really did think there was something dubious about ethical claims because conclusions of sound ethical arguments don't force themselves causally on those who consider them, then being

¹² I note, for the record, the word 'almost'.

¹³ I discuss the prospects of a small sample of arguments of this variety in Lillehammer 2007, Ch. 7.

reminded that this is the case across the whole of human thought should make you think again. Second, individual applications of the strategy will be more or less probative depending on whether or not all other things (or features) are equal across contexts. Thus, if Bambrough is right that logic and ethics both rest on the same kind of unarguable bedrock, those who thought that ethical claims resting on some kind of unarguable bedrock is distinctively problematic should think again. Yet even if both ethical and logical claims rest on some kind of unarguable bedrock, the objective credentials of logical claims could be comparably more secure in virtue of their possession of some additional feature that ethical claims do not possess; such as being 'rationally inescapable', or otherwise indispensable to rational thought (or some other distinguishing feature). Having said that, by increasing the number of relevant parallels between ethical claims and their companions, some of Bambrough's arguments by analogy can - in principle - be used to construct an 'inductive' case for the objective credentials of ethical claims by gradually 'crowding out' the space for allegedly debunking differences. Thus, if ethics and logic actually share the five features targeted by Bambrough, this means that there are five fewer ways in which the objective credentials of ethical claims are vulnerable to sceptical doubt. (It is not as if none of the features targeted by Bambrough have ever been seriously put forward as evidence for ethical scepticism by any philosopher, ever.) Of course, the list of potential comparisons could in principle be extended. Yet the interesting respects in which ethical claims have been thought of as distinctively problematic is finite.

Bambrough's use of arguments by analogy is therefore potentially effective against a range of sceptical arguments, in spite of the modesty of its ambitions. In particular, the five arguments mentioned above do not involve the contention (definitive of arguments by entailment) that ethical claims are implied by factual or logical claims; that ethical claims are co-extensive or

otherwise equivalent to factual or logical claims; or that ethical claims are somehow presupposed by factual or logical claims.¹⁴ One thing Bambrough's arguments do imply is that ethical claims, logical claims and factual claims all embody the feature of being rational or irrational; or being responsive to reasons.¹⁵ To this extent, they all belong to the same normative 'kind', namely claims that are subject to rational contestation. Yet if all claims we could ever intelligibly make or contest belong in this space (including astrological claims and claims about the secrets of alchemy), to say this is really not to say more than that ethical thought belongs to the domain of rational human thought as such. And it is hard to see how anyone seriously worried about the objective credentials of ethical claims in particular should be deeply impressed by that claim.

b) From analogy to absorption:

Russ Shafer-Landau's paper 'Ethics as Philosophy' (2006) provides a more recent source of arguments by analogy. Shafer-Landau's key idea in this paper is that ethical claims form a 'species' of a 'genus' that exhibits many of the allegedly problematic features of ethical claims, but the objective credentials of which, qua 'genus', are not in question. The genus to

¹⁴ To be more precise, in some places Bambrough come close to making one or more of these stronger claims, as when he writes: 'Logic is the ethics of the intellect'; logic is a 'normative science'. Ethics is the logic of the will and the emotions' (Pierce). Logical validity is a *value*.' (105). I pass over this complication here.

¹⁵ At the time that Bambrough wrote his book, the now much contested distinction between *reasons* and *rationality* had not yet been made such a big deal of in the standard literature. See e.g. Lord 2018.

which ethical claims is said to belong is that of ‘philosophical’ claims.¹⁶ The central argument of Shafer-Landau’s paper goes as follows (Shafer-Landau 2006, 215): *i) Ethics is a species of enquiry; philosophy is its genus* (let’s call this ‘the species claim’); *ii) A species inherits the essential traits of its genus* (let’s call this ‘the inheritance claim’); *iii) There are (among others) two essential traits of philosophy: the realistic status of its truths, and its status as something other than a natural science* (let’s call this ‘the objectivist claim’; *iv) Therefore nonnaturalistic ethical realism is true* (let’s call this ‘nonnaturalist ethical realism’). In what follows, I will mainly be concerned with the species claim and the objectivist claim. I will have less to say about the inheritance claim, and will have nothing of substance to say about the merits of nonnaturalist ethical realism.

Consider, first, the species and objectivist claims. It is a historically indisputable fact that the credentials of philosophy have been subjected to massive criticism from highly reputable sources over the last hundred years; from logical positivism and the later Wittgenstein in the earlier parts of the Twentieth Century, through deconstruction and postmodernism in the latter half of that Century, to ‘immanent’ critiques of analytical philosophy at the start of the Twenty-first. Indeed, so much diversity and controversy exists about the nature and methodology of what goes by the name of ‘philosophy’ that one might wonder if there is anything interestingly unified here to describe as a distinctive ‘genus’ at all. If not, then

¹⁶ Shafer-Landau writes: ‘So long as it is true (as almost every working philosopher presupposes) that there is an objectively correct view about central philosophical puzzles, then we have just as much reason to accord the same status to ethical matters’ (221). This remark has at least one curious feature which it is pertinent to note here: it is an argument appealing to an (alleged) fact of agreement.

Shafer-Landau's argument is doomed from the start.¹⁷ For present purposes, however, this is not of vital importance. What is of more importance for present purposes is not so much the soundness of the argument as such as its relationship to the two varieties of companions in guilt argument I have previously discussed.

Throughout his paper, Shafer-Landau points out the existence of important parallels between ethical claims and (other) philosophical claims. Here are some examples:

- 6) 'My preferred strategy... invokes a parallel between philosophy in general, and ethics in particular' (210)

So: ethical and philosophical claims share some relevant features. Yet the fact that two sets of claims share some feature does not imply that either set of claims is a subset of the other in some explanatorily interesting way.¹⁸ As we have seen in the discussion of Bambrough, however, this need not undermine our interest in the relevant parallels. If the respects in which ethical claims and their companions are parallel include some of the respects in which ethical claims have been thought of as distinctively problematic, then we could in principle have the basis for an ('inductive') argument by analogy in defence of the objective credentials of ethical claims.

¹⁷ For two recent examples of the third kind of criticism, see e.g. Price 2011 and Unger 2014. It doesn't help here that one of the examples given by Shafer-Landau of a philosophical issue (as involving intractable disagreement) is the problem of 'universals' (see e.g. p. 216; c.f. Unger 2014.)

¹⁸ This ambiguity is also present elsewhere: 'Ethics is a branch of philosophy... My central claim is that there are very close parallels between ethical investigation and that pursued in philosophy quite generally' (215) Once more, the existence of 'very close parallels' between one set of claims and another does not imply that either set of claims is a subset of the other in some explanatorily interesting way.

Yet this is arguably not the best way to interpret Shafer-Landau's argument. On a more plausible interpretation, the argument works the other way around; i.e. by inferring the existence of the relevant parallels from the fact that ethics is a species of philosophy. The following statement is decisive:

- 7) 'As ethics is a branch of philosophy, we have excellent reason to think that fundamental ethical principles share the same status as fundamental philosophical principles.' (217)¹⁹

So: if ethics is a species of philosophy, and if a species shares the essential features of its genus (that's the inheritance claim, which I am just granting in this paragraph for the sake of argument); and if it is essential to the genus that it has solid objective credentials; then ethical claims have solid objective credentials. The thought that ethical claims and philosophical claims share some allegedly problematic features has no independent load-bearing weight in this chain or reasoning, but is instead an implication of prior claims about their respective species and genus.

Thus interpreted, Shafer-Landau's argument exemplifies a distinctive variety of the companions in guilt strategy. This variety shares at least one essential feature of standard arguments by analogy, namely the premise that both ethical claims and their proposed companion share some allegedly problematic features. Yet this variety of the strategy goes further than standard arguments by analogy by claiming that i) these features are 'essential' to

¹⁹ Elsewhere, Shafer-Landau writes: 'Once we attend to the fact that ethics is a branch of philosophy, the plausibility of nonnaturalistic moral realism is greatly enhanced. Philosophy is not a natural science. Basic, fundamental philosophical principles are realistic in nature. And central ethical principles are philosophical ones.' (230)

both sets of claims, and ii) one of them constitutes a genus of which the other is a species.²⁰ This variety of the strategy also shares at least one essential feature of standard arguments by entailment, namely the premise that some of the claims in one set entail some of the claims in the other. Yet in the case of this third variety of argument, the key idea is not that the relevant companion claims somehow entail some ethical claims. If ethical claims just *are* a species of philosophical claim, then *all* ethical claims entail at least *some* philosophical claims and at least *some* philosophical claims entail *all* ethical claims, for no more interesting reason than that all claims entail themselves.²¹ The postulation of identity ensures that the relation of entailment holds both ways, for at least some of the relevant claims. Let's call arguments that take this form 'arguments by absorption' (Ethics now being thought of as absorbed by Philosophy).

There are at least three crucial assumptions embodied in Shafer-Landau's argument, each of which is worthy of comment. The first assumption is that the sharing of features that obtains between ethical and philosophical claims is such as to make them of the same genus. There is at least some scope for questioning this assumption if applied to ethical and philosophical claims in general. True, paradigmatically 'meta-ethical' claims about the nature and status of 'first-order' ethical claims do have some non-accidental (or 'core') features in common with paradigmatically philosophical claims that make it natural to classify both as members of the same genus. (Thus, the claim that ethical beliefs express truth-apt propositions that are true, if they are, necessarily is plausibly of the same genus as the claim that mathematical beliefs

²⁰ Suppose that both colours and values are essentially response dependent properties. Then both colours and values may be species of the genus 'response dependent property'. It does not follow that either colours or values are a genus of which the other is a species.

²¹ It does not follow that all, or even most, philosophical claims entail ethical claims. (Metaphysical claims about the coherence of tropes, for example, may not.)

express truth-apt propositions that are true, if they are, necessarily.) Yet this is much less obviously so for paradigmatically ‘first order’ ethical claims. (Thus, the claim that torturing innocent people is wrong is not so obviously of the same genus as the claim that mathematical beliefs express truth-apt propositions that are true, if they are, necessarily (a ‘meta-mathematical’ claim); nor as the claim that adding Seven to Five makes Twelve (a ‘first-order’ mathematical claim.) Much here will obviously depend on how we understand the relationship between ‘first-order’ claims and ‘meta-level’ claims in the areas of thought at issue. Although there is not enough space to pursue this question further here, the answer to it is at least as controversial as the point at issue.

The second assumption is that it is ethical claims that are a species of the genus ‘philosophical claims’ and not the other way around. Merely to question this assumption might seem preposterous. Yet there is a possible view in this area, not too different from Shafer-Landau’s own, that is at least weakly supportive of this reversal. Broadly speaking, the thought is this: philosophical claims are claims about how we should articulate, think, and apply our thoughts across different areas of discourse. As such, they involve commitments or recommendations that prescribe norms of correct, or good thinking. As such they are a species of the genus of evaluative or normative claims. Among the commitments or recommendations that prescribe norms of correct or good thinking are ethical norms and values. Hence, all philosophical claims imply or presuppose ethical norms and values. If so, the best way to understand paradigmatically philosophical claims is as evaluative or normative claims the ultimate credentials of which are no more secure than the credentials of

paradigmatically ethical claims are, and hence not an obviously innocent companion' for the purposes of a companions in guilt argument.²²

I state this line of thought not in order to defend it, but in order to make two further observations. First, if it were sound, this argument would provide the basis for an argument by entailment; assuming, that is, (as I have conditionally granted) that the objective credentials of philosophy are not in question.²³ Second, this argument is not available to Shafer-Landau as I am now interpreting him. According to this interpretation, it is ethical claims that are a species of philosophical claims, not the other way around; and the language of 'species' and 'genus' arguably militates against the hypothesis that ethics and philosophy are mutually implicative in the relevant way. There is therefore a tension between the argument by absorption on the one hand, and this kind of argument by entailment on the other.

The third assumption is that the features of philosophical claims that ethical claims allegedly share are not combined with other features distinctive to ethical claims in such a way as to undermine the objective credentials of ethical claims in particular. To take one frequently discussed example which also plays a central role in Shafer-Landau's paper, consider the issue of ethical disagreement. Here is a sample of things that Shafer-Landau says about disagreement:

²² It may be worth recalling here part of the remark previously quoted from Bambrough: 'Logic is the ethics of the intellect'... Logical validity is a *value*.' (105) I am grateful to David Killoren for making me rephrase the point made in this paragraph.

²³ For discussion of the kind of argument by entailment in question, see e.g. Lillehammer 2007, Ch. 4.

- 8) ‘At this point we can introduce the ethics-philosophy parallel and use it to defend nonnaturalism from the argument from disagreement... There is truth – a real, objective truth – about whether the mental is identical to the physical, or about whether certain kinds of freedom are compatible with determinism’ (219)

As before, there is an issue here about whether Shafer-Landau is out to defend the credentials of ‘meta-ethical’ claims, of ‘first-order’ ethical claims, or both.²⁴ Yet even ignoring the reservations registered above about the disputed history of philosophy’s objective credentials, scepticism about the objective credentials of ‘first-order’ ethical claims does not obviously imply scepticism about ‘meta-ethical’ claims. Indeed, scepticism about the objective credentials of ethical claims is itself an instance of a meta-ethical claim. Hence, it is not clear why pointing to the fact of widespread philosophical disagreement about the metaphysics of mental states or the freedom of action should be thought of as decisive at this point.

We arguably get closer to the crux of the matter in the following passage:

- 9) ‘One...criticism – that persistent, intractable moral disagreement is best explained as antirealists would do – can be met once we avail ourselves of the ethics-philosophy parallel. Moral disagreement shares all structural features with philosophical disagreement generally, and yet a global philosophical antirealism is very implausible’ (230)

Here, at last, we have what looks like a focus on ‘first order’ ethical disagreement and the ‘meta-ethical’ question of what explains it. In this passage, however, the claim that ethics is a

²⁴ Given the textual context, it is arguably meta-ethical claims that are primarily in focus at this point: ‘The philosophical stance that denies the existence of nonnatural moral properties is itself the subject of intractable disagreement’ (220)

species of the genus ‘philosophy’ plays no explicit role, and is arguably redundant. (Some room for doubt is left by the presence of the word ‘generally’.) What we have instead is an appeal to ‘the ethics-philosophy parallel’, and hence an instance of a standard argument by analogy.²⁵ Be that as it may, what we now want to know is if there are any features of ethical disagreements in particular that distinguish them from other kinds of disagreements (including paradigmatic philosophical disagreements) the objective credentials of which are not in doubt. Whether or not ethical disagreements are a species of philosophical disagreement does not in itself settle that issue, no more than the fact that the alchemy practiced by Newton is a species of the genus ‘science’ on a par with his other naturalistic speculations would vindicate the objective credentials of alchemy (or, alternatively, undermine the objective credentials of Newtonian physics). At least as far as the claim that ethics is a species of philosophy is concerned, the possibility remains that some philosophical claims are more vulnerable with respect to their objective credentials than others. In this respect, the argument by absorption I have considered here is in the same boat as conventional arguments by analogy.

²⁵ The following statement, reminiscent of Bambrough, exhibits the same features: ‘There is a striking equivalence between the nature and source of our evidence in philosophy, and in ethics. We have no choice but to rely on our intuitions and considered judgements in both... If such convictions... have no evidential credibility, then we should have to regard all philosophical beliefs as unjustified. Perhaps they are. But then those of the ethical naturalist, and the moral antirealist, are similarly undone’ (224) Apart from the uncomfortable possibility that we may have ‘no choice’ but to participate in a practice that is theoretically incoherent or self-defeating, the ‘joker in the pack’ here is the word ‘equivalence’, which suggests something stronger than a sharing of features, yet without implying a relationship of ‘species’ to ‘genus’. For the record, Shafer-Landau’s paper also includes companions in guilt arguments that do not obviously exemplify these ambiguities, e.g. when he considers the relationship between ethical claims and epistemological claims (See e.g. p. 228-230). A more fully worked out discussion of this argument and how best to interpret it can be found in Cuneo 2007.

The way Shafer-Landau articulates his argument may give the impression that this is a possibility we can rule out. He writes:

10) ‘The most brilliant philosophers, rational, open minded, and well informed, have failed to agree amongst themselves on just about every key philosophical issue.... Provided that one brings to a dispute a moral belief that is justified, then the exposure to conflicting belief needn’t defeat one’s justification, even if one is unable to convince an intelligent other of the error of his ways’ (223)

Suggestive as they are, these remarks are obviously not decisive.²⁶ The intractability of disagreement on one set of claims (or ‘species’) could well have a different explanation than the intractability of disagreement on another set of claims (or ‘species’) of the same kind (or ‘genus’), provided there are relevant differences between the two sets of claims that account for the identically observed effects. Thus, if paradigmatically ethical claims imply the existence of an irreducibly absolute form of normativity that some other paradigmatically philosophical claims do not, for example; and if (as some so-called ‘error theorists’ claim) there are no irreducibly absolute normative facts of the relevant kind, although there are non-absolute normative facts of the other kind; then the intractability of ethical disagreement could in principle be explained by the non-existence of ethical facts in particular, while the intractability of disagreement about other philosophical claims will have to receive some different explanation, such as the sheer abstraction or difficulty of the subject matter.²⁷ Showing that ethics is a branch of philosophy and that it thereby shares all of philosophy’s

²⁶ There are wider issues here about the status of peer disagreement that I am unable to do justice to here. For a representative sample of recent work in the field, see Feldman & Warfield 2010.

²⁷ I am using this example here purely for the purposes of illustration. To accord with the assumptions I have attributed to Shafer-Landau, I am also bracketing the hypotheses that all philosophical claims either are, or entail, ethical claims; and that there are no distinctively philosophical facts.

essential features does therefore not establish that those essential features include having secure objective credentials. (Indeed, given all the things that could reasonably be said to pass as ‘philosophy’, it is hard to believe that it possibly could.) An alternative way forward, and one that Shafer-Landau should be happy to contemplate, is to build an ‘inductive’ case against the sceptical hypothesis by means of a battery of arguments by analogy. I conclude that, at least in the version I have considered here, the argument by absorption has no more probative force than standard versions of its more modest sibling.²⁸

Bibliography

Bambrough, R. 1979, *Moral Scepticism and Moral Knowledge*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Blackburn, S. 2010, *Practical Tortoise-raising and other Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bloomfield, P. 2001, *Moral Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brink, D. O. 1989, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cowie, C. 2014. ‘Why Companions in Guilt Arguments Won't Work.’ *The Philosophical Quarterly* 64, 407-422.

Cowie, C. 2016. ‘Good News for Moral Error Theorists: A Master Argument Against Companions in Guilt Strategies’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94, 115-130.

²⁸ I am grateful to the organizers and participants at the *Companions in Guilt* workshop in Rome in September 2017 for helpful discussion of this paper, and to David Killoren for his comments on it on that occasion.

- Cuneo, T. 2007, *The Normative Web*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cuneo, T. 2009, Review of Hallvard Lillehammer, *Companions in Guilt: Arguments for Ethical Objectivity*, *Mind* 118, 492-497.
- Das, R. 'Bad News for Moral Error Theorists: There is No Master Argument Against Companions in Guilt Strategies', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95, 58-69.
- Enoch, D. 2009, 'How Is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?', *The Journal of Ethics* 13, 15-50.
- Feldman, R & Warfield, T. A. (eds.), 2010, *Disagreement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foot, P. 2001, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hampton, J. E. 1998, *The Authority of Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hare, R. M. 1963, *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Joyce, R. 2003, Review of Paul Bloomfield, *Moral Reality*, *Mind* 112, 94-99.
- Korsgaard, C. 1997, 'The Normativity of Instrumental Reason', in G. Cullity & B. Gaut (eds.), *Ethics and Practical Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 215-54.
- Lillehammer, H. 2007, *Companions in Guilt: Arguments for Moral Objectivity*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lillehammer, H. 2013, 'The Companions in Guilt Strategy', *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, (ed.) H. LaFollette, Oxford: Wiley.
- Lillehammer, H. 2018, 'Projection, Indeterminacy and Moral Skepticism', in D. Machuca (ed.), *Moral Skepticism: New Essays*, New York: Routledge, 33-47.
- Lord, E. 2018, *The Importance of Being Rational*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McDowell, J. 1979, 'Virtue and Reason', *The Monist* 62, 331-350.

Price, H. 2011, *Naturalism without Mirrors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rowland, R. 2016, 'Rescuing Companions in Guilt Arguments', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 66, 161-171.

Shafer-Landau, R. 2006, 'Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism', in T. Horgan & M. Timmons (eds.), *Metaethics after Moore*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 209-232.

Shafer-Landau, R. (ed.), 2013, *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*. Second Edition. Oxford: Wiley.

Unger, P. 2014, *Empty Ideas: A Critique of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.