

Metaepistemology

EDITED BY

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Defending the Moral/Epistemic Parity

Terence Cuneo and Christos Kyriacou

1. Introduction

In *The Normative Web* (2007), one of us (Terence Cuneo) gave voice to the intuitive idea that moral and epistemic realism stand or fall together.¹ This intuitive idea finds expression in what the book calls:

The Core Argument

- P1: If moral facts do not irreducibly exist, then epistemic facts do not irreducibly exist.
- P2: Epistemic facts irreducibly exist.
- C1: So, moral facts irreducibly exist.
- P3: If moral facts irreducibly exist, then moral realism is true.
- C2: So, moral realism is true.²

In a critical appraisal of *The Normative Web*, Chris Heathwood (2009) argues that we ought to reject the argument's first premise—the so-called parity premise. Heathwood's objection hinges on two claims. The first is:

A true sentence reports a descriptive (i.e. non-normative) fact if and only if its semantic content is analyzable solely in descriptive terms.

¹ This last claim is probably the mainstream view regarding the relationship between the moral and the epistemic domains and is found, explicitly or implicitly, in the work of Kim (1993), Shafer-Landau (2006), Ridge (2007), Chrisman (2007), Street (2009), Rowland (2013), and Kyriacou (2016).

² Here we follow Heathwood (2009)'s formulation of the argument, which slightly differs from that presented in *The Normative Web* (TNW). (Hereafter we incorporate page references to Heathwood's article in the body of our text.) It is worth noting that TNW works with a distinctive account of what it is for a moral fact to irreducibly exist. According to this account, a moral fact irreducibly exists just in case it is not identical with a fact of a kind that fails to satisfy what TNW calls our *commonsensical conception of moral facts*. This conception is constituted by two types of platitudes. Simplifying somewhat, the *content platitudes* tell us that morality has to do with human well-being or the goods that compose it. The *authority platitudes*, in contrast, specify that some moral reasons are categorical. According to TNW, this understanding of irreducibility is, in principle, compatible with either moral naturalism or non-naturalism.

The second is:

The semantic content of epistemic sentences is analyzable in solely descriptive terms, but the semantic content of moral sentences is not.

From these claims, Heathwood concludes that:

True epistemic sentences report descriptive facts while true moral sentences do not.

From which it follows that:

Epistemic facts are descriptive while moral facts are not.

Given the further assumption that a moral or an epistemic fact irreducibly exists in case it is not descriptive, we can conclude, says Heathwood, that the parity premise is false.³

Call the claim that epistemic facts are descriptive while moral facts are not, the *disparity thesis*. Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis is striking in several respects. For one thing, his case is not driven by the conviction that the normative domains as such can be reductively analyzed. To the contrary, Heathwood identifies himself as sympathetic with the non-reductive moral realist view that *The Normative Web* defends (indeed, with a non-naturalist version of moral realism (83)). What is more, Heathwood supports the second premise of his argument by appealing to a version of the Open Question Argument (OQA), employing one prominent argument often used in favor of non-reductive realism to block another argument for it. In so doing, Heathwood presents non-reductive realists with what appears to be a difficult choice: give up on either the Core Argument or the OQA. The choice looks difficult because no matter which option they choose, non-reductive realists will have one less argument for their view than they would like.

In this chapter, we contend that non-reductive realists do not face this difficult choice. Or, to state our central contention more accurately, we argue that non-reductive realists do not face this difficult choice for the reasons that Heathwood offers, since they ought not to reject the parity premise on the basis of anything like Heathwood's argument for the disparity thesis. Central to our case is the claim that, while analyzing epistemic concepts in terms of descriptive ones has its attractions, it is considerably more challenging than Heathwood maintains.

Our focus, then, will be on one attempt to defend the claim that epistemic concepts and facts are descriptive. But we have larger ambitions. When responding to the Core

³ A caveat: if Heathwood's case were sound, it would not establish that the parity premise is false. For his argument would establish only this conjunction: if moral facts exist, then they irreducibly exist and if epistemic facts exist, then they do not irreducibly exist. The truth of this conjunction, however, is compatible with the parity premise. To generate an inconsistency, we would need to read the parity premise as a biconditional, which says that moral facts irreducibly exist if and only if epistemic facts irreducibly exist. While TNW does not present the parity premise as a biconditional, we will proceed as if the premise can be read as a biconditional.

Argument, an increasing number of philosophers have argued that we should hold that epistemic concepts or facts are descriptive.⁴ Since these positions are often not worked out in detail, one possibility is that their advocates would endeavor to develop their descriptivist positions along the lines that Heathwood suggests. If the argument we press against Heathwood's position is correct, however, then following Heathwood's lead is not a promising option. Epistemic descriptivist views will have to be developed along different lines. At the end of our discussion, we touch again on this matter.

2. The Case for the Disparity Thesis

Let's begin by laying out Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis in more detail, beginning with the notion of a descriptive fact. A descriptive fact, Heathwood tells us, is a fact that can be expressed in (solely) descriptive terms. Examples of such facts would include *that Germany invaded Poland*, *that Obama is presently making a difficult decision*, and *that people prefer happiness to misery*. *Moral descriptivism* is the thesis that moral facts—roughly, those facts reported by true sentences containing predicates such as (morally) “good,” “just,” and “right”—are identical with descriptive facts. *Epistemic descriptivism*, in contrast, is the thesis that epistemic facts—roughly, those facts reported by true sentences containing predicates such as (epistemically) “justified,” “reasonable,” and “warranted”—are identical with descriptive facts. The disparity thesis implies that we ought to take up different attitudes towards these two views, rejecting moral descriptivism but accepting epistemic descriptivism.

On the face of things, this is a surprising proposal, since the types of arguments offered for moral descriptivism by philosophers such as Frank Jackson and Mark Schroeder would seem to generalize to epistemic facts.⁵ Jackson's proposal, you will recall, goes through the claim that facts which are intensionally (or metaphysically) equivalent are identical. Since moral facts are intensionally equivalent with the descriptive facts on which they supervene, so Jackson claims, they are identical with these descriptive facts. But if this is right, the same will be true of epistemic facts; they, too, will be intensionally equivalent with the descriptive facts on which they supervene and, thus, identical with them.

As already indicated, Heathwood wishes to distinguish his approach from those such as Jackson's by making two main moves. The first is to assume that:

A true sentence reports a descriptive fact if and only if its semantic content is analyzable solely in descriptive terms. (88)

For ease of reference, we'll refer to this assumption as the *assumption of analysis*. Heathwood is well aware, of course, that many philosophers would reject this

⁴ See Husi (2011), Lenman (2008), and Olson (2011); (2014), ch. 8.

⁵ See Jackson (1998), ch. 5 and Schroeder (2007), ch. 4.

assumption. And in his essay he offers no defense of it.⁶ While we believe that the assumption of analysis is questionable, we will not dispute it in our discussion, noting only that if one were to reject it, Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis would have little appeal.

The second move that Heathwood makes is to build a case for the premise that:

The semantic content of true epistemic sentences is analyzable in solely descriptive terms, but the semantic content of true moral sentences is not.

Heathwood's case for this premise is one that turns on a version of the OQA.

According to Heathwood's favored version of the OQA, we begin with a pair of terms. The first member of the pair is a paradigmatic moral term such as "being (morally) good." In Heathwood's view, there is no realistic prospect of analyzing the meaning of sentences that employ such a term by appeal to only descriptive concepts, such as *something we desire*. We can see this, says Heathwood, by employing the following test:

The Moral OQA

- M1. The sentence "this is something we desire, but it's not good" is not self-contradictory.
- M2. If M1, then "good" does not mean the same as "something we desire."
- M3. Therefore, "good" does not mean the same as "something we desire." (86)

Heathwood generalizes from this case to the conclusion that it is reasonable to believe that "no analysis of the moral in terms of the descriptive will be plausible" (87).

The second term that Heathwood presents is the paradigmatic epistemic term "being (epistemically) reasonable." In this case, Heathwood offers a different verdict, maintaining that there is a realistic prospect of analyzing the meaning of sentences that employ this term by appeal to only descriptive concepts, such as the concept *LIKELY, GIVEN MY EVIDENCE*. We can see this, says Heathwood, by employing this test:

The Epistemic OQA

- E1. The sentence "this is likely, given my evidence, but it's not reasonable for me to believe it" is not self-contradictory.
- E2. If E1, then "reasonable for me to believe" does not mean "likely, given my evidence."
- E3. Therefore, "reasonable for me to believe" does not mean "likely, given my evidence."

Heathwood finds the Epistemic OQA much less compelling than the Moral OQA, maintaining that E1 is probably false because it does seem to "have an air of incoherence"

⁶ Those who reject the assumption of analysis maintain that moral facts might be descriptive even if the semantic contents of true moral sentences that report them were not analyzable in solely descriptive terms. Heathwood states that, in the context of the present dialectic, he can safely ignore so-called synthetic descriptivist views since TNW also rejects them (88, n. 8).

sincerely to assert the sentence "this is likely, given my evidence, but it's not reasonable for me to believe it" (90). To illustrate his point, Heathwood offers the following example:

Suppose I am having a visual experience as of a table in front of me. Suppose this in fact makes it very likely that there is a table in front of me. Now I say, "Yes, I see that it's quite likely to be true that there is a table in front of me, but, still, I don't think it's reasonable for me to believe that there is a table in front of me." This is a puzzling thing to hear. It seems to be grounds for thinking that I do not really understand what I am saying... This is not at all how it is in the moral case... [t]his suggests that it might be true that all that reasonable belief amounts to is likely truth and that analytic descriptivism is true of epistemic normativity. (90)

Having concluded that we have good reason to reject the Epistemic OQA because E1 appears to be false, Heathwood proceeds to make a last "crucial point," which is that it doesn't matter whether his analysis of epistemic reasonability is exactly right or needs some further "tinkering." What matters is that our semantic intuitions in the moral and epistemic cases are substantially different: in the case of the Moral OQA, we detect no incoherence in accepting the sentence embedded in its first premise, but in the case of the Epistemic OQA, we do. Even if his account of reasonability needs further tinkering, Heathwood maintains that we can be "optimistic that epistemic facts are just facts about likelihoods" of some sort (91).

To sum up: suppose that we accept the assumption of analysis, holding that a true sentence reports a descriptive fact if and only if its semantic content can be analyzed solely in descriptive terms. If we do, Heathwood contends, we can locate an asymmetry between the epistemic and moral domains. The asymmetry is that while true epistemic sentences report descriptive facts, true moral sentences do not. If this is correct, Heathwood concludes, then we have excellent reason to hold that while epistemic facts are descriptive, moral facts are not. But if this is so, then we have excellent reason to reject the parity premise in favor of the disparity thesis.

3. The First Stage: Three Points of Hesitation

In our exposition of Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis, we have tried to be maximally conciliatory. We've conceded, for argument's sake, that the assumption of analysis is true. We've also raised no objections to the assumption that the OQA could reliably give us insight into the nature of moral and epistemic facts. In what follows, we'll argue that even if we accept both these assumptions, we ought not to be persuaded by Heathwood's challenge to the parity premise. Our response comes in three stages. In this section, we present the first stage, voicing several points of hesitation about Heathwood's case.

At the outset of our discussion, we noted that Heathwood presents non-reductive realists with what seems to be a difficult choice: give up on either the Core Argument or the OQA. The first point that we would like to make is that there is good reason to

believe that non-reductive realists—by which, at this juncture, we mean *non-naturalist* moral realists⁷—face no such choice. This is because non-naturalists hold that:

- (A) When some fact is a reason to believe, intend, or act, then its being a reason (i.e. its having the property of being a reason) is not a descriptive fact.

The rationale for (A), according to what is arguably the dominant view among non-naturalists, is that there are not multiple types of reason properties. There is only one type of reason property and that is the property *being such as to favor or being such as to justify*.⁸ And this property, non-naturalists contend, is not a descriptive property. However, suppose Heathwood is right and epistemic facts—including the fact *that something is (i.e. has the property of being) a reason to believe*—are descriptive. And suppose, as Heathwood himself indicates, that his argument commits non-naturalists to the claim:

- (B) Given our evidence, it is likely that epistemic descriptivism is true.

Given (A), it would follow that the (putative) fact that (B) expresses could not be a reason (i.e. have the property of being a reason) to believe epistemic descriptivism. Indeed, it would follow that, given (A), for any claim whatsoever, the fact that that claim is likely given our evidence could not be (i.e. have the property of being) a reason to believe it. Among the claims that non-naturalists endorse, though, is:

- (C) Given our evidence, non-naturalism is more likely than its rivals.

But if (C) is true, then the putative fact that (C) expresses could not be (i.e. have the property of being) a reason to believe non-naturalism. This implication, however, would leave non-naturalists in a bind, as it's not clear what other reason non-naturalists could have or offer to believe their view—especially if entailment relations are also descriptive, as Heathwood claims (93). By all appearances, then, it looks as if epistemic descriptivism is not a view that is amenable to moral non-naturalists, contrary to what Heathwood claims.

We present this not as a decisive objection to Heathwood's argument but only as a point of hesitation regarding it. The reason is that non-naturalists could, in principle, revise their view, maintaining that there are not one but two types of reason properties: one that is wholly descriptive and one that is not. In that case, non-naturalists could hold that while there are no non-descriptive reasons to believe their view and other claims, there are descriptive reasons to do so. Now, as a matter of fact, prominent moral

⁷ As we've pointed out, Heathwood's argument hinges on the assumption of analysis. All versions of non-reductionist naturalism, however, reject this assumption. Since they do, Heathwood's argument makes contact with only non-naturalist versions of non-reductive realism, since these views sometimes accept something like the assumption of analysis.

⁸ Rowland (2016) offers a defense of the claim that moral and epistemic reasons are instances of the same fundamental relation, as do Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (forthcoming). The assumption that they are appears to be implicit in the work of non-naturalists such as Parfit (2011) and Scanlon (2014).

non-naturalists such as David Enoch and Derek Parfit reject this approach—for what strike us as good reasons, given their non-naturalism.⁹ But our intent here is not to establish that these philosophers are correct to claim that there are only non-descriptive reasons. Rather, it is only to draw attention to the fact that the disparity thesis sits uneasily with non-naturalism.

We turn to our second point of hesitation. Suppose, for argument's sake, that while the Moral OQA establishes that the fact *that something is good* is not descriptive, the Epistemic OQA establishes that the fact *that it is reasonable to believe a proposition* is descriptive. What would follow? Well, note that our doxastic attitudes can display a wide variety of epistemic merits (and demerits), such as being a case of knowledge, certain, warranted, reliably formed, virtuous, and justified. Moreover, in addition to having epistemic merits, our doxastic attitudes can be supported by evidence or reasons—these being what favor or justify our having one or another doxastic attitude.¹⁰ In the context of the present dialectic, the diversity of epistemic merits is significant, for it has at least this implication: given this diversity, we cannot move from the claim that we have furnished a successful descriptive analysis of the concept BEING REASONABLE to the further claim that similar analyses are available for whatever other epistemic concepts there may be.

Admittedly, a successful descriptive analysis in one case might license optimism, boosting confidence that analyses of other epistemic merits will be forthcoming. We would, however, counsel caution about drawing any general conclusions on the basis of such confidence, mostly because the various epistemic merit concepts appear to differ widely. Consider, for example, a broadly externalist epistemic merit concept such as BEING RELIABLY FORMED. It is fairly easy to imagine being offered a descriptive analysis of such a concept—the reliably formed belief simply being the one that is produced by a process or faculty that yields a preponderance of true beliefs. But now consider the more internalist concept that Richard Foley calls “rationality” and Nicholas Wolterstorff calls “entitlement.” In this case, it is not so easy to imagine being offered a successful descriptive analysis, for the concept that these philosophers have in mind is thoroughly deontological, applying to an agent when (and only when) she has not been negligent or irresponsible in forming, maintaining, or modifying her doxastic attitudes.¹¹ Or to

⁹ Enoch (2011) and Parfit (2011), for example.

¹⁰ Although talk of reasons and evidence may appear to have internalist connotations, we remain non-committal on whether to understand these notions along epistemic internalist or externalist lines. So far that we can see, nothing of what we say here hinges on how to resolve the internalism/externalism controversies.

¹¹ See the exchange between Foley (2005) and Wolterstorff (2005). Wolterstorff (2010) maintains that a belief is entitled just in case it is not non-entitled. As for the latter property, Wolterstorff writes: “What makes a person not entitled to some feature of his belief- or knowledge-system is that either (i) there is some practice of inquiry that he failed to employ but ought to have employed with a seriousness and competence such that, had he done so, the presence of that feature would have been forestalled or eliminated; or (ii) there is some practice of inquiry that he employed with a certain seriousness and competence but ought not to have (thus) employed, and which is such that, had he not employed it thus, the presence of that feature would have been forestalled or eliminated” (105).

put the point we wish to make more modestly: one could imagine being offered the crucial details of an ambitious reductive program in which the concept of entitlement is reduced to or explained solely in terms of descriptive concepts. However, absent being offered these details—which Heathwood himself does not furnish—it is not easy to imagine what such a case would look like.

The point we are pressing is important, we believe, because deontic concepts such as ENTITLEMENT are fundamental not only to our practices of epistemic evaluation, such as when we hold people accountable for ignoring the evidence available to them, but also to our understanding of other epistemic concepts, such as KNOWLEDGE. Think, for example, of how those who advocate a prominent strand of virtue epistemology understand knowledge. According to these philosophers, when an agent knows a proposition *p*, her belief that *p* must not only be true but also be the output of an epistemically virtuous doxastic process or faculty in hospitable conditions.¹² Nearly all accounts of knowledge of this sort, however, specify that a belief is virtuously formed only when an agent has not formed it in a negligent fashion. If this is so, then epistemic concepts such as KNOWLEDGE, BEING VIRTUOUSLY FORMED, and BEING ENTITLED are enmeshed in such a way that if a descriptive analysis of the last is not forthcoming, then neither are descriptive analyses of the former.¹³

Our second point of hesitation, then, is that given the variety of epistemic merit concepts that appear importantly different, a successful descriptive analysis of the concept BEING REASONABLE would provide little reason to accept epistemic descriptivism across the board. We turn now to our third point of hesitation, which is that any attempt to analyze the concept BEING REASONABLE in terms of the likelihood of a proposition given an agent's evidence needs to specify *which* of an agent's evidence bears upon the likelihood of that proposition. The concern we harbor is that, when we specify which evidence matters, Heathwood's proposal no longer appears to be a version of epistemic descriptivism.

For note that it won't do simply to propose that it is reasonable for you to believe a proposition *p* if and only if *p* is most likely given some subset of your available evidence. This proposal is too indiscriminate, since we need to know which subset is in question. But it is no better to propose that it is reasonable for you to believe *p* if and only if *p* is most likely given *all* of your available evidence, since this proposal is similarly indiscriminate. After all, for just about any proposition and agent, there is a vast amount of evidence available to that agent for that proposition which she cannot reasonably be expected to take into account.

¹² Accounts in this neighborhood would include Code (1987), Greco (2000), Montmarquet (1993), and Zagzebski (1996).

¹³ Some philosophers seem attracted to the thesis that deontic concepts such as ENTITLEMENT are not epistemic but ethical. The idea goes back to at least Clifford (1879) and Chisholm (1966). According to TNW, however, they could be both; see TNW ch. 2.

To take a variant of Heathwood's earlier case, imagine that you walk into a room, have the visual experience as of a table, and immediately form the belief *that there is a table in front of me*. Suppose, however, that among the evidence available to you is a small placard posted outside the room which you've entered, which states that you are about to view a masterful *trompe l'oeil* mural that contains an image of a table.¹⁴ Given all your available evidence, it follows that the proposition *that there is a table in front of me* is not likely and, thus, according to Heathwood's proposal, it is not reasonable for you to believe that there is a table before you. But, by all appearances, it is reasonable for you to believe that there is a table before you. By no fault of your own or your eyes, you simply missed taking into account some available but not easily detectable information.¹⁵

We acknowledge that some philosophers appear to reject the argument just offered, holding that rational or justified belief is determined by an agent's total evidence.¹⁶ Before moving forward, let us say two things about such a denial.

First, the view that rational or justified belief is determined by an agent's total evidence might be plausible if it is *propositional* rationality or justification that is in question, since whether a proposition is justified might be a function of the total evidence for it. It is, however, much less plausible to hold that *doxastic* justification or rationality is determined by an agent's total evidence, since it is not apparent how an agent could base a belief on her total evidence—such evidence often being too vast for any ordinary agent to take into account. By all appearances, however, Heathwood's descriptivist proposal concerns not propositional but doxastic reasonability (cf. 90). It follows that even if propositional justification or rationality were determined by one's total evidence, we could not conclude that the reasonability of an agent's having a belief is determined by that agent's total evidence.

Second, suppose it were true that a belief's having a doxastic merit such as *being justified* is determined by an agent's total evidence. It wouldn't follow that the doxastic merit *being reasonable*, which we are understanding along broadly deontic lines, would also be determined by an agent's total evidence. That would follow only if one identified reasonability with justification, thinking of the latter along deontic lines.¹⁷ But if one does think of justification along deontic lines, then the line of argument offered above has bite: one could be justified in the sense of being epistemically "in the clear" even when one fails non-culpably to take into account one's total evidence.

¹⁴ We can even suppose, if you like, that this placard enters into the periphery of your visual field. In that case, we can suppose that you are subconsciously aware of the placard but do not notice it.

¹⁵ Gibbons (2006) argues similarly. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this reference.

¹⁶ The assumption, for example, seems implicit in Kelly (2006).

¹⁷ An alternative would be to think of both justification and reasonability along non-deontological lines. In that case, the objection we are pressing could be reformulated as a point about not reasonability but rationality or entitlement, as Foley and Wolterstorff think of these merits. Our second point of hesitation articulates why we think that, in the context of this discussion, this merit cannot be ignored.

So, we need a better option, one that is more discriminate in character than those we've considered. In our judgment, the only way forward is to specify that, when it comes to reasonability, it is one's *relevant* evidence that matters. If this is right, Heathwood's proposal would come to this:

(RS) "It is reasonable for you to believe p" shares the same semantic content as "p is most likely, given your relevant evidence."

The problem facing (RS), however, is that the evidence that is relevant for you is not simply the evidence that you actually have (or take into account) when believing p. Rather, it is the evidence that you *ought* to have (or take into account) when believing p.¹⁸ Indeed, under one plausible interpretation, to say that some evidence is what you ought to have (or take into account) is not to say that it is that evidence which you would have (or take into account) were you perfectly rational or occupied idealized conditions, since reasonable agents often fail to exhibit perfect rationality or occupy idealized conditions. Rather, the relevant evidence is what those of us who understand your circumstances could *reasonably expect* you to have (or take into account). If this is right, then there is really a two-fold problem that faces Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis. First, (RS) does not even have the appearance of implying a version of epistemic descriptivism, since the right-hand side of (RS) expresses not simply descriptive concepts but also, by all appearances, normative ones. Second, under a very plausible reading, (RS) is circular, since it attempts to analyze the concept of reasonability in terms of the very same concept. While circularity of this sort probably does not render (RS) uninformative, no case for the disparity thesis could appeal to (RS) so understood.

We conclude this section by adding a pair of caveats. The first is that by putting forward (RS) as our most promising gloss of the concept BEING REASONABLE, we don't take ourselves to have offered a satisfactory analysis of this concept. In all likelihood, if anything approaching an adequate analysis is available, it would have to incorporate still other nuances into (RS), such as the proviso that to be reasonable in believing p, you must believe p on the basis of your relevant evidence. The second caveat we add is that by highlighting the apparently normative dimensions of (RS), we do not wish to suggest that there is no satisfactory descriptive analysis of the concept RELEVANT EVIDENCE and, hence, the concept BEING REASONABLE. Our aspirations are much more modest. We wish to maintain only that the line of argument that Heathwood presents does not provide any reason to believe that such a descriptive analysis is forthcoming and that, at best, (RS) is not a clear case of such an analysis. In the next section, we explain in more detail why even this modest conclusion presents problems for Heathwood's case for the disparity claim.

¹⁸ We hasten to add that, as we understand the "ought" in question, failing to believe as you ought needn't imply that you are liable to blame. Handfield (2012), 15–20 defends a position similar to the one we present.

4. The Second Stage: Employing the OQA

In the last section, we said that our response to Heathwood's challenge to the parity premise would come in three stages. In this section, we develop the second stage of our response. Our primary objective in this stage is to build upon some of the concerns raised in the last section, casting further doubt on Heathwood's employment of the OQA. To be clear, our objective in this section is not to raise objections to the OQA itself, contending that it is not the sort of argument that could vindicate epistemic descriptivism. Rather, it is to raise some concerns about Heathwood's *employment* of this argument in favor of epistemic descriptivism.

Heathwood, recall, employs a version of the OQA to establish an asymmetry between the epistemic and moral domains, maintaining that while epistemic concepts (and facts) are descriptive, moral concepts (and facts) are not. Stated somewhat differently, the asymmetry that Heathwood wishes to establish is that the epistemic domain admits of a reductive analysis, while the moral domain does not. By claiming that Heathwood wishes to defend a reductive analysis of the epistemic domain, we do not wish simply to point out that, in Heathwood's view, epistemic sentences and descriptive sentences share the same semantic content. After all, to point out that the term "race" means "competition with respect to speed of movement" would hardly count as advocating a reduction of the concept RACE. Reductions—and here we have in mind so-called conceptual reductions, which analyze the semantic content of one term or sentence in terms of the semantic content of another—typically require more than mere identity of semantic content between terms or sentences. They also typically require that, with regard to any putative analysis, there is sufficient apparent conceptual "distance" between its analysandum and analysans such that it comes with some surprise (at least to the uninitiated) that its analysandum expresses the same semantic content as its analysans.¹⁹

Ideally, we would like to have a detailed account of how to unpack the use of the metaphor of "conceptual distance" in this context and how much apparent distance there must be between an analysandum and an analysans for there to be a reduction of the former to the latter. Unfortunately, we have no such account and so must settle for simply noting the following, which we take to suffice for current purposes. Like the concepts EVIDENCE and PROBABLE, the notion of CONCEPTUAL DISTANCE is gradable, coming in degrees. Since this is so, the concept expressed by one phrase can bear more or less apparent distance from the concept expressed by another phrase. Moreover, while we have no account of how much apparent distance there must be between an

¹⁹ See Alston (1996), ch. 2. One could, in principle, reject this understanding of a reduction, holding that when, for example, we demonstrate that "bachelor" means "eligible unmarried male," we have reduced the semantic content of the first phrase to that of the latter. If that is your view, then we could present our view regarding reduction thus: philosophically interesting cases of reduction—ones in which we try to reduce putative entities that are taken to be problematic in some way to entities that aren't—typically involve conceptual distance of the sort we have in mind.

analysandum and an analysans for some proposal to count as a reduction of the former to the latter, we have paradigm examples with which to work. If we could reduce the concept expressed by the phrase “mental state” to that expressed by the phrase “complex of behavioral dispositions,” for example, that would be a case in which there is sufficient apparent distance to constitute a reduction of the former to the latter.

With that noted, return to Heathwood’s employment of the OQA, recalling that its purpose is to establish an asymmetry between the moral and epistemic domains. To establish this asymmetry, Heathwood’s employment of this argument would have to provide good reasons to hold that epistemic concepts admit of a reductive analysis, while moral concepts do not. It seems to us, however, that we have no such reasons. To the contrary, it seems to us that we have as much reason to believe that we can furnish a reductive analysis of epistemic concepts as we have to believe that we can furnish a reductive analysis of moral concepts. There is, so far that we can tell, no asymmetry between epistemic and moral concepts in this respect.

Perhaps the best way to articulate this point is to work with a series of comparisons. Begin by considering the following trio of putative reductions, each of which attempts to reductively analyze the semantic content expressed by the phrase “it is reasonable for you to believe p”:

Proximate: “it is reasonable for you to believe p” shares the same semantic content as “you ought to believe p, given your evidence.”

Less proximate: “it is reasonable for you to believe p” shares the same semantic content as “p is most likely, given your relevant evidence.”

Distant: “it is reasonable for you to believe p” shares the same semantic content as “it is coherent for you to believe p.”

These comparisons may suggest a rough tripartite scale of conceptual distance. *Proximate* might succeed as an analysis of the semantic content of the phrase “it is reasonable for you to believe p.” But it fails as a reductive analysis because its analysandum and analysans express very similar normative concepts; it should come as no surprise that the phrases “being reasonable” and “being what one ought to believe” (at least under one prominent construal) share similar meanings. *Less proximate*, which represents a modified version of Heathwood’s proposal, is different. It might succeed at securing a meaning identity and it might also succeed as a reduction. Whether it does will entirely depend on whether the notion of RELEVANT EVIDENCE can be understood in solely descriptive terms. In the last section, we raised the concern that we have not been offered any reason to believe that it can; at best, *Less proximate*, we claimed, appears to be an inconclusive case of a reductive analysis. Finally, *Distant* clearly fails as an analysis and, hence, as a reductive analysis of “reasonable,” since there is no prospect of *Distant*’s constituent phrases sharing the same semantic content. That said, if these phrases were to share the same semantic content, we would have excellent reason to hold that *Distant* succeeds as a reductive analysis, since there is sufficient apparent distance between the concepts expressed by the terms “reasonable” and “coherent.”

We can replicate this same dynamic in the moral domain. Take, for example, Heathwood’s own candidate of a paradigmatic moral concept, viz., BEING GOOD. Since one common way to think of something’s goodness is in terms of the attitudes that it merits, let’s use the phrase “being prized” to stand for a variety of attitudes an agent might have toward something, such as admiring it, desiring it, cherishing it, and the like. Now consider the following trio of putative reductions:

Proximate: “x is morally good” shares the same semantic content as “x merits being prized.”

Less proximate: “x is morally good” shares the same semantic content as “x would be prized by an ideal agent in idealized conditions.”

Distant: “x is morally good” shares the same semantic content as “x would be prized by you and me.”

Proximate might succeed as an analysis of “x is morally good,” but it fails as a reductive analysis because its analysandum and analysans express very similar normative concepts; as proponents of so-called “buck-passing accounts” have urged, phrases such as “being morally good” and “merits being prized” are very close in meaning.²⁰ *Less proximate*, in contrast, might succeed at identifying two phrases that share the same semantic content and it might succeed as a reductive analysis. But if it does, everything will depend on whether the notion of idealization can be unpacked in purely descriptive terms, which remains to be seen. Like its epistemic analogue, then, it appears to be an inconclusive case of a reductive analysis. *Distant*, finally, clearly fails as an analysis and, hence, as a reductive analysis of “x is morally good.” That noted, if it were to succeed as an analysis, it would appear to be genuinely reductive, as the phrase “x would be prized by you and me” seems to express purely descriptive content.

We conclude that Heathwood’s employment of the OQA fails to establish any interesting asymmetry between the epistemic and moral domains. In both cases, we can identify plausible candidates for (i) genuine analyses that are not reductive because the analysans employs normative concepts very similar to that employed in the analysandum; (ii) putative analyses that are inconclusively reductive because the analysans incorporates concepts that might well be normative; and (iii) putative analyses that are not reductive because they are not genuine analyses at all. In the last section, we argued that, at best, Heathwood’s own proposal regarding the meaning of “reasonable” falls into the second, inconclusive category. In this regard, it is no different from candidates that philosophers have offered for understanding the semantic content expressed by the term “good,” such as “being prized by an ideal agent in idealized conditions.” If this is so, then the parity premise emerges unscathed. Even if we assume that the OQA reveals to us the nature of normative facts, we see little reason to believe that epistemic facts are descriptive, while moral facts are not.

²⁰ See Scanlon (1998) and Way (2013), for example.

5. The Third Stage: Probability

We have been pressing the case that we should resist Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis, arguing that when we identify a plausible candidate for the meaning of "reasonable," there is no interesting asymmetry between the epistemic and moral domains. There is, however, one last issue worth exploring that Heathwood himself canvasses, and that is whether the concept of probability is itself descriptive. If we fail to have good reasons to believe that it is, then we would have yet another reason to resist Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis, since we would have good reason to believe that analyzing the concept REASONABLE in terms of the concept PROBABLE would not count as a genuinely descriptive analysis. In this, the third stage of our response, we contend that Heathwood's case for the claim that the notion of probability is descriptive fails.²¹

Heathwood recognizes that it is a live question whether the concept PROBABLE is descriptive. Still, he takes it to be evident that probability is not a normative but a descriptive notion, writing that, if probability were normative, then it would be indexed to the attitudes of agents (92). But, Heathwood continues, this does not appear to be

a plausible understanding of probability. Its main problem is that it founders on an epistemic variant of Plato's Euthyphro problem. Suppose we look out the window and see that the streets are wet. We conclude that it probably rained. But which seems right: That it is true that it probably rained in virtue of the fact that it is reasonable to believe that it rained, or that it is reasonable to believe that it rained in virtue of the fact that it probably rained? Surely, the latter is correct. Facts about what is probably true are more basic, and indeed, we use these facts in deciding what to believe (i.e., in deciding what is reasonable to believe). We explain why it would be reasonable to believe something by establish that that thing is probably true, and not the other way around. (93)

There are three claims being stated or assumed in this passage. The first is that there is one relevant notion of probability for analyzing the concept BEING REASONABLE.²² The second is that this notion is one according to which probability facts are not relative to evidence or dependent on the mental states of agents; they are not "subjective" but objective "patterns of the world" (93). The third claim is that probability facts are not normative but descriptive. Strictly speaking, these claims are logically independent of one another, but it's worth noting that if probability facts were "objective patterns in the world," it would be much easier to see how they could be descriptive, since the existence and nature of these patterns would be entirely independent of our evidence. If, by contrast, the existence and nature of probability facts were contingent on our evidence,

²¹ Other critics of the Core Argument, such as Lenman (2008) and Olson (2011), have voiced similar suggestions, maintaining that the notion of evidence, which many take to be fundamental to the epistemic domain, can be unpacked in terms of what raises the probability of a proposition.

²² In fact, probability theorists often distinguish different types of probability and it is not clear that a single notion could be used to analyze the concept of reasonability. See, for example, Hacking (1975), Plantinga (1993), Mellor (2005), Handfield (2012), and Childers (2013).

then it would be much more difficult to see how they could be purely descriptive, since we would once again face the question of which evidence is relevant for determining these facts.

We submit that Heathwood's proposal regarding probability is subject to a dilemma. Suppose, on the one hand, that we attempt to analyze the concept BEING REASONABLE by appeal to an *objective intrinsic* account of probability, as Heathwood suggests.²³ If we do, then we will not be able to fashion an adequate analysis of the concept BEING REASONABLE. Suppose, on the other hand, we attempt to analyze the concept BEING REASONABLE by appeal to a *conditional epistemic* account of probability. If we do, then we might arrive at an adequate analysis of this concept. That analysis, however, would provide no reason to believe that probability facts are descriptive; to the contrary, we'll suggest, it would provide reason to believe that such facts are normative, in which case Heathwood's case for the disparity thesis would collapse.

We begin with the dilemma's first horn, which appeals to two variations of a "biased coin" thought experiment. Here is the first version: Suppose that a coin has either heads on both sides or that it has tails on both sides, but you don't know which. Suppose, for argument's sake, that the coin has tails on both sides. It follows that, no matter what evidence you have, the objective intrinsic probability of the coin coming up tails is 1. And thus, according to (RS), it is reasonable for you to believe that the coin will come up tails. But, of course, it is not reasonable for you to believe this because you have no evidence for this claim. Hence, schema (RS) is false. A belief's being objectively probable is not sufficient for it to be reasonable.²⁴

Here is the second version of the thought experiment: Imagine that you have strong evidence that a coin is biased towards turning up tails, although unbeknownst to you, the coin is fair. In this case, the objective intrinsic probability of the fair coin turning up tails is 0.5. But the reasonable thing to believe, given your evidence, is that the coin is likely to turn up tails upon flipping. It follows that schema (RS) is false. A belief's being objectively probable is not a necessary condition for it to be reasonable.

Turn, now, to the second horn of our dilemma, which supposes that the relevant notion of probability that we need is not objective intrinsic but conditional epistemic probability. The problem with working with this notion of probability, however, should already be evident given our prior discussion of evidence: we have no good reason to believe that this sort of probability is merely descriptive, since when a proposition enjoys this type of probability, this is not an agent-independent fact of the world but is relative to an agent's evidence. The problem, note, is not simply that it is a matter of some debate whether the concept of evidence itself is normative.²⁵ It is also that when

²³ We borrow the terminology "objective intrinsic probability" from Swinburne (2004). Mellor (2005) uses the terminology of "unconditional probability." These probabilities are objective because they are not features of or determined by our mental states, and intrinsic because they are not conditional upon our evidence.

²⁴ See Joyce (2004), 153. As Sorensen (2005) notes, Laplace had raised the same issue when discussing the notion of subjective probability.

²⁵ Kelly (2006) addresses the issue.

we look at various proposals for understanding the notion of conditional epistemic probability, their normative dimensions are fairly apparent.

To see the point, consider a broadly Reidian view according to which the conditional epistemic probability of a proposition is determined by that degree of credence that an agent with properly functioning cognitive faculties in a congenial mini-environment (who has no defeaters) would have with respect to it.²⁶ This is, for several reasons, clearly a normative analysis of conditional epistemic probability, implying that—if schema (RS) is correct—we analyze reasonability in terms of what Plantinga calls *warrant* (and the normative notion of being a defeater). Plantinga, however, understands warrant in terms of the proper function of our cognitive faculties. A cognitive faculty functions properly, Plantinga claims, when it functions as it ought to—where the relevant sense of “proper” is not a statistical but a normative one.

Or suppose, somewhat differently, that we accept a broadly Bayesian account of conditional epistemic probability. In this case, we would assign a probability to some phenomenon on a hypothesis. How probable the phenomenon is on this hypothesis will, however, be a function of its prior probability, which (roughly) will be a matter of the evidence we have for our hypothesis independent of the phenomenon.²⁷ Which evidence? Well, as we saw earlier, not all of it. Moreover, we cannot simply pick and choose which evidence, arbitrarily fixing upon some evidence to the exclusion of other evidence. (At least, we cannot if the notion of probability in play is not a subjective but an objective one, as Heathwood claims.) Rather, to determine a proposition’s prior probability, we need to take into account the relevant evidence for that proposition, which is not a matter of appealing to evidence that you have or might have, but what you ought to have or take into consideration. Of course the details of this approach can be developed in different ways.²⁸ The point is that this general approach, which appeals to the notion of prior probability, is by all appearances also normatively laden.²⁹

Our contention, in sum, is that we cannot understand the notion BEING REASONABLE in terms of the concept of objective intrinsic probability. But neither does it look any more promising to understand it in terms of the notion of conditional epistemic probability. In pressing these points, we wish to (re-)emphasize that our conclusion is supposed to be modest. We are not claiming that the notion of probability that

Heathwood needs in order to analyze the concept BEING REASONABLE is normative. Rather, we are arguing that we have been offered insufficient reason to hold that the relevant notion is merely descriptive, pointing out along the way that understanding conditional epistemic probability in normative terms appears to be the dominant view.

Philosophers such as Ian Hacking have argued that there is a reason that understanding conditional epistemic probability in normative terms is the dominant view.³⁰ For in the paradigm case, ascribing one or another probability to a proposition is supposed to *guide* our beliefs in the sense of giving us good reason to accept them. If such ascriptions did not have this role, then it would be very difficult to see why we should care more about them rather than other merely descriptive features that propositions might have, such as their having truth-values that are temporally invariant or their being composed of concepts. At any rate, our overall conclusion is that a satisfactory defense of epistemic descriptivism of the sort Heathwood endorses would require a defense of the claim that the notion of probability needed to reductively analyze epistemic notions is merely descriptive. That defense, however, has not been forthcoming.

6. Prospects for Reduction

Is there an asymmetry between the moral and the epistemic domains, one according to which we have good reason to believe that while epistemic concepts and facts are descriptive, moral concepts and facts are not? In his essay, Heathwood maintains that there is such an asymmetry, defending the disparity thesis. We have argued that there appears to be no such asymmetry, defending the claim that, at this point, non-reductive realists do not face the difficult choice of having to choose between accepting either the Core Argument or the OQA.

Given that we’ve focused on Heathwood’s case for epistemic descriptivism, it would be hasty to draw any general conclusions about the prospects for epistemic descriptivism as such. Still, as we noted at the outset of our discussion, an increasing number of philosophers have found embracing epistemic descriptivism to be the most promising response to the Core Argument. However, if Heathwood’s attempt to defend the position is illustrative, it turns out to be exceedingly difficult to offer plausible descriptive analyses of epistemic concepts. There is, among other things, no easy generalization to make from the success of a reductive analysis of one epistemic concept to the claim that epistemic descriptivism as such is true. If so, we suspect that epistemic descriptivism will have to be developed along different lines—lines that do not require us to offer satisfactory reductive analyses of epistemic concepts. Like Heathwood, other defenders of epistemic descriptivism have not been sympathetic with moral descriptivism.³¹ The challenge for many of these views will be to explain why, if reductive analyses of

²⁶ Plantinga (1993), chs 8–9 defends this view.

²⁷ Both Mellor (2005) and Childers (2013) canvass the critical role of prior probabilities in Bayesianism.

²⁸ Among other things, one could attempt to understand the relevant notions in broadly expressivist terms, as Rothschild (2012) and Yalcin (2012) do. Handfield (2012) addresses expressivist and error-theoretic approaches to probability.

²⁹ It might be possible to construct a descriptivist account of probability by employing the framework of conditional probability. This would be an account of probability that takes the probability of a phenomenon to be conditional on some given hypothesis, where this conditional probability is reducible to merely descriptive facts. Call such a descriptive account a *conditional non-epistemic probability* theory in order to distinguish it from the conditional epistemic probability position sketched above. We remain skeptical about the prospects of a conditional non-epistemic probability theory, partly because the normative questions of which evidence to take into account and how to proportion belief on the relevant evidence seem no less pressing on this view than on the conditional epistemic approach.

³⁰ See Hacking (1975).

³¹ See Olson (2014), ch. 8, for example.

epistemic concepts are not required to be a descriptivist about the epistemic domain, we should be descriptivists in the epistemic domain but not in the moral domain.³²

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