CHAPTER 15

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# MORAL CONCEPTUAL TRUTHS

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## JOHN BENGSON, TERENCE CUNEO,
## AND RUSS SHAFER-LANDAU

ALL versions of moral realism include a commitment to objective moral truths. Realists have offered a variety of conceptions of such truths and their truth-makers. Here we advance a relatively unexplored option for moral realism, arguing that a set of substantive moral propositions qualify as conceptual truths: their truth-makers are the essences of their constituent concepts. Although this claim is in one respect ecumenical—strictly available to both naturalists and nonnaturalists alike—we believe it is a key element in a powerful form of nonnaturalism.[1]

While a number of moral philosophers have floated the idea that some moral propositions are conceptual truths,[2] few have advanced anything like the position we'll develop. Our discussion has four distinctive features. First, whereas others have suggested that one or another abstract moral proposition is a conceptual truth, our project encompasses concrete moral claims regarding the moral status of richly intentional actions, specific character traits, and the like. Second, our defense of this position is backed by a systematic account of what it is to be a conceptual truth. Third, this account adverts to essences, rather than linguistic, semantic, psychological, or epistemic phenomena. Fourth, our defense is notable not only because it enables realism to address unanswered questions about the explanation of moral truths, but also because it supports a key premise in a new argument for moral realism.

## 1. THE MORAL FIXED POINTS

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Our focus in this chapter is a range of moral platitudes or truisms that are central to ordinary moral life in at least two ways: for morally engaged agents, they can be invoked

[1] Developed more fully in Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2024).
[2] Moore (1903, §89), Ewing (1939), Smith (1994, ch. 3, §9 and 185), Darwall (2006, 20, 27–8, and 94), Street (2009, 292 and 2016, 327), and Swinburne (2020).

in defense of their moral decisions in particular situations, and can inform decision-making and behavior in those situations. We call the relevant platitudes *moral fixed points* (or simply "fixed points"). Here are candidate examples of what we have in mind:

- It is (defeasibly) right to offer aid to those in deep distress.
- It is (defeasibly) right to protect one's children from lethal danger.
- It is (defeasibly) wrong to recreationally slaughter fellow persons.[3]
- Acting from prideful ignorance is bad.
- There is reason not to break a promise on which another is relying simply for convenience's sake.
- It is fitting to repay kindness with kindness.
- Justice is a virtue.

While there are important differences among these and other candidate fixed points—including the fact that they invoke a variety of moral and nonmoral considerations—let us highlight what they have in common.

First, they identify an entity's specific moral status, whether right or wrong, fitting or unfitting, virtuous or vicious, or the like. Each moral status comes with a valence, whether positive or negative. To reiterate, that status may be defeasible. For example, it may be that the fixed point is not that acting from prideful ignorance is bad, but rather that it is only defeasibly bad.[4]

Second, we'll understand fixed points to be conditional in their logical form. For instance, the logical form of the fixed point that it is required to protect one's children from lethal danger is: if an action is an instance of protecting one's children from lethal danger, then that action is required. Similarly, the logical form of the fixed point that justice is a virtue is: if a character trait is that of being just, then that trait is a virtue. And so on.

Third, fixed points are not contingent but metaphysically necessary, being true in every possible world.[5] So, while fixed points are platitudes, they are distinct from other sorts of moral maxims that might be thought of as platitudinous because they are broadly endorsed, widely relied upon, apparently obvious, or generally helpful. A claim's having features such as these is not enough to qualify it as a fixed point.

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[3] By "right" we mean required; by "wrong" we mean prohibited. To be clear, these examples are meant to be instances of *moral* requirement, reason, virtue, etc. We omit the "moral" qualifier throughout.

[4] It is possible to qualify fixed points in other ways as well. For example, their application could be restricted in such a way that, although they are true in every possible world, they do not *apply* to certain beings in certain worlds (*cp.* Cuneo and Shafer-Landau 2014, §2). Such restrictions would protect against putative counterexamples involving bizarre scenarios. It might be alleged, for instance, that there is nothing wrong with recreational slaughter in worlds containing agents who spontaneously regenerate. We believe that in any such scenario, the action is defeasibly wrong, though we allow that there may be some cases in which its wrongness has been fully defeated. Those who disagree (or who wish to err on the side of caution) are invited to interpret the platitudes as being restricted in their application to beings like us in worlds like ours.

[5] We defend this claim in §5.1, below.

We will argue that fixed points are true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding their constituent concepts. This idea is the keystone to our view, defended below, that fixed points are conceptual truths.

## 2. THE ESSENCES OF THE CONCEPTS IN FIXED POINTS

We first elucidate the notion of essence before identifying two components of the idea, which we subsequently defend, that fixed points are true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding their constituent concepts.

### 2.1 Essence

The essence, or nature, of something is *what it is to be that thing*, or *what that thing is at its core*. Philosophers through the ages have found the notion of essence helpful, and recent theorizing in post-modal metaphysics and formal logic has shown it to be on firm footing. Essences are not spooky or ghostly auras that somehow attach to things, but are always given by reference to features (or sets of features) identified by "essential truths": true propositions that specify or state what it is to be a given entity.

There are essential truths about entities belonging to a wide variety of ontological categories (e.g., properties, material objects, mental states, concepts, numbers, and people). Possible examples of essential and nonessential truths Include:

| Candidate Essential Truths | Nonessential Truths |
| --- | --- |
| Water is composed of hydrogen molecules. | Water is sold in plastic bottles. |
| Desire is directed at something. | Desire is a topic of Shakespeare's sonnets. |
| The concept SHELTER is satisfied by something only if it has a particular type of function. | The concept SHELTER is satisfied by some of Frank Lloyd Wright's favorite artifacts. |
| The property *being a triangle* is instantiated only by figures with exactly three interior angles. | The property *being a triangle* is instantiated by an image on the flag of the Bahamas. |

Although none of these candidate essential truths purports to reveal the whole essence of its target, each plausibly registers at least one strand of the thing's essence. For example, what it is to be a desire is, at least in part, to be directed at something. Contrast being a topic of Shakespeare sonnets—that is not part of what it is to be a desire. As the examples above illustrate, we often have an easy time discerning essential truths and distinguishing them from nonessential ones. (We'll have more to say about the epistemology of essence in §3.)

Essential truths identify the essences of things without announcing that they are the essences of those things. There are also facts that explicitly register that the essence of some entity is such and such. An example is

[It belongs to the essence of water that it be composed of hydrogen molecules.]

Though distinguishing such 'essence facts' (as we'll call them) from their corresponding essential truths may seem overly fastidious, the difference between them proves to be philosophically significant, and will play an important role below.

Essence is distinctive in large part owing to its logical behavior. There are four logical principles that are particularly relevant for our purposes.[6]

First, essence has *modal force*: every essential truth is metaphysically necessary. That is, if it belongs to the essence of $x$ that $x$ is $F$, then, necessarily, $x$ is $F$.[7]

Second, essence is *hyperintensional*: metaphysical necessity is insufficient for essentiality, which is not closed under intensional equivalence. The insufficiency clause says that it is not true that if, necessarily, $x$ is $F$, then it thereby belongs to the essence of $x$ that $x$ is $F$. For example, as Aristotle observed, while it may be necessary that a human being is featherless, it is not part of the essence of a human being to be featherless: this is not what a human being is at its core. The second clause adds that even if it is essential to $x$ that it is $F$, and $x$'s being $F$ is necessarily equivalent to $x$'s being $G$, it needn't be essential to $x$ that it is $G$. Developing Aristotle's example, although it may be that it is essential to a human being that it is rational, it is not essential to a human being that it is both rational and such that yellow is a color.

Third, essence is *noncontingent*: if it belongs to the essence of $x$ that $x$ is $F$, then, necessarily, it belongs to the essence of $x$ that $x$ is $F$. Put in the language of "worlds": necessarily, for any worlds $w_1$ and $w_2$, if $x$ is essentially $F$ at $w_1$, then $x$ is essentially $F$ at $w_2$. For example, if it belongs to the essence of a vase that it is a type of vessel, then a vase has that essence as a matter of necessity. It's not that a vase just happens to be, at its core, a type of vessel.

Fourth, essence is *non-transient*: necessarily, for any times $t_1$ and $t_2$, if $x$ is essentially $F$ at $t_1$, then $x$ is essentially $F$ at $t_2$. For instance, if gold essentially has atomic number 79, then gold has that essence at all times.

## 2.2  The Essentialist Thesis

Having explicated the category of fixed points and clarified the notion of essence, we can now state our main proposal:

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[6]  See Fine (1995) and Correia (2005, Appendix A) for further work on the logic of essence.

[7]  Some may wish to add here (and perhaps in the other principles): "at every possible world where $x$ exists." Some may also (or instead) wish to add a restriction to times.

Essentialist Thesis: Moral fixed points are essential truths with respect to the concepts that constitute their antecedents and are true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding those concepts.

We first discuss the claim that fixed points are essential truths with respect to their constituent concepts; we then turn to the additional claim that they are true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding their constituents. Our remarks in this section are not intended to offer defenses of these claims (we defend them below), but rather to clarify what they say.

Some fixed points include moral concepts in their antecedents, such as

1. <Justice is a virtue>.

As we see it, it is not an accidental feature of the concept JUSTICE that any character trait that falls under it also falls under the concept VIRTUE. Rather, it is essential to the concept JUSTICE that (when it concerns character traits) it is an aretaic concept with a positive moral valence. The idea is not that its being such a concept follows from its essence, but instead that this is part of its essence. Thus the claim is that the concept JUSTICE is essentially such that any character trait to which it applies must also fall under the concept VIRTUE. In this way 1 is like the proposition <Desire is directed at something>: they are each essential truths.

Similar claims hold for other fixed points, including those that contain only non-normative concepts in their antecedents. To illustrate, consider the fixed point

2. <It is wrong to recreationally slaughter fellow persons>.

The concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS is itself non-normative; after all, this concept does not belong to any of the standard normative categories (viz., evaluative, deontic, favoring, fitting, or aretaic). At the same time, the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS is not accidentally related to the moral concept WRONG. What it is to be the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS is to be a concept that applies to an action only if that action also falls under a deontic concept with a negative moral valence.

By way of contrast, consider the claim that

3. <Leaving sharp knives unattended is wrong>.

This claim, though true in most cases, is no essential truth. The concept LEAVING SHARP KNIVES UNATTENDED is not essentially related to the moral concept WRONG, even if, as a matter of fact, we are ordinarily subject to a moral obligation to make sure that such dangerous objects are stored with care. The former concept is not essentially such as to apply to an action only if that action also falls under the latter. This marks an important difference between 3, on the one hand, and 1 and 2, on the other.

In the previous section we identified four logical principles governing essence. Our view that fixed points are essential truths fully accords with each. Take 2, for instance. On

our view, this truth has modal force: necessarily, an action satisfies the former concept only if it also satisfies the latter.[8] At the same time, our view does not imply that all metaphysically necessary truths pertaining to the concept RECREATIONALLY SLAUGHTERING FELLOW PERSONS are essential truths, or that those truths can be swapped out for necessarily equivalent ones when registering the essence of this concept; accordingly, our position obeys hyperintensionality. Similarly, our position obeys intransience and non-contingency, which implies that RECREATIONALLY SLAUGHTERING FELLOW PERSONS has the essence that it does at all times and in all worlds. By respecting all four of the logical principles governing essence, the Essentialist Thesis shows itself to be highly disciplined.

So far we have focused on clarifying the claim that fixed points are essential truths with respect to the concepts in their antecedents. The Essentialist Thesis adds that they are true *fully in virtue of* essence facts regarding those concepts.

To illustrate, consider 1. We claim that it belongs to the essence of the concept JUSTICE that it is satisfied by a character trait only if that trait also falls under the concept VIRTUE. Because of this essence fact, 1 is true: that proposition is true fully in virtue of an essence fact regarding JUSTICE. Likewise for 2 and the other fixed points: they do not simply state truths regarding the essences of their constituent concepts, but are true fully in virtue of corresponding essence facts, which explicitly register the essences of those concepts. That is what the Essentialist Thesis asserts.[9]

## 2.3  The Theoretical Significance of the Essentialist Thesis

The Essentialist Thesis is theoretically important in several other ways as well. We will briefly mention two. First, it supports a key premise in a new style of argument for the thesis, central to moral realism, that there are moral truths. As we've seen (and will further defend in the next section), a range of non-normative concepts possess moral essences. Supposing, as is plausible, that at least some of those concepts are satisfied, it follows that the moral concepts in the essences of these non-normative concepts are satisfied as well. And so we achieve the conclusion that there are true moral propositions—just as moral realism says.[10]

Second, the Essentialist Thesis supports a key step in an explanation of a wide range of moral truths, including fixed points, that is friendly to realism, including its

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[8] Recall our earlier caveat (from §1.1) that the relevant moral status may be defeasible. See also note 4.

[9] The *in virtue of* claim in the Essentialist Thesis may seem to follow naturally from the essentialist claim in that thesis. But we won't rely on this link when defending the *in virtue of* claim, for there is much to be learned from a different style of argument, which we develop in §5.

[10] This essence-based argument should not be confused with controversial Moorean arguments (as discussed by, e.g., McPherson 2009, Rowland 2012, Olson 2014, ch. 7, and Sampson 2023), which differ from ours in several respects: for example, Moorean arguments focus on claims that range well beyond conceptual truths, and do not concern themselves with the essences of concepts.

nonnaturalist incarnations. Realists are often perceived as skirting the question: *why* are such propositions true? The Essentialist Thesis allows a straightforward answer: *because* it belongs to the essence of the concepts in their antecedents that they are satisfied only if the moral concepts in their consequents are also satisfied. Notice, moreover, that such explanation does not advert to agential stances, social conventions, divine commands, or the like. Consequently, the Essentialist Thesis helps to make good on moral realism's commitment to the objectivity of morality.[11]

## 3. PRICEAN REFLECTION

Our claims about the morally-valenced essences of the concepts in fixed points can be defended by enlisting the support of the eighteenth-century British moral philosopher Richard Price, who wrote in his *Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*:

> [A]ll actions . . . have a nature. . . . This may be, that some of them are right, others wrong. But if this is not allowed; if no actions are, *in themselves*, either right or wrong, or any thing of a moral and obligatory nature . . . it follows, that, in themselves, they *are* all indifferent. This is what is essentially true of them, and this is what understandings, that perceive right must perceive them to be. . . . [I]t seems sufficient to overthrow any scheme that such consequences . . . should arise from it: . . . That there be nothing [by its nature] proper or improper, just or unjust; there is nothing *obligatory*; but all beings enjoy, from the reasons of things and the nature of actions, liberty to act as they will.[12]

Price is inviting us to reflect on the essences of actions, and asserting that at least some of those essences are morally valenced—and, moreover, that "understandings that perceive right" see this to be so. The implausibility of holding otherwise—of maintaining that all actions are, by their nature, morally indifferent—suffices to "overthrow" any theory that implies such a thing.

We find the core of this line of thought deeply congenial. Consider the act of raising one's arm. Consider the action itself, wholly apart from whatever might happen to be associated with it. If you are like us, you find the action itself indifferent at its core: no moral valence belongs to its nature. Despite being permissible in most (or even all) contexts, this is not part of *what it is* to raise one's arm. Now place before your mind a different type of action—betraying the vulnerable, say, or deliberately humiliating those who are weak and guileless. See the difference? Not all actions are created equal: While it

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[11] This is a brief sketch of an argument that we develop at greater length in Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2024, ch. 6).

[12] Price (1787/1948, §I.3, emphases in original).

may be that some are morally indifferent, not all are. Some are, by their nature, morally loaded, possessed of a moral essence that at least partly contributes to that action's being what it is.

Let us introduce the following procedure. Consider an entity, then ask if it is at its core morally indifferent: is its essence devoid of moral content? If the answer is no, then we possess at least some justification for believing that it belongs to its essence to have a moral valence (positive or negative). In some cases, a specific moral status (right, wrong, fitting, etc.) may also be apparent. Call an application of this procedure an instance of "Pricean reflection." This is a species of essentialist reflection, whereby we consider an entity, $x$, and ask what belongs to its essence. If the answer is that what it is to be $x$ is to be $y$, then we possess at least some justification for believing that $y$ belongs to $x$'s essence.[13]

When applied to concepts, the procedure can be stated succinctly: consider a concept, then ask whether the target concept is, by its nature, satisfied only if whatever falls under it also satisfies some moral concept. If reflection reveals that the answer is yes, then we possess at least some justification for concluding that it belongs to its essence to be morally valenced. When the target concept constitutes the antecedent of a proposition, and a moral concept revealed through Pricean reflection constitutes its consequent, we possess at least some justification for believing that that proposition is an essential truth regarding the concept in the antecedent.

Such reflection is not wholly alien to contemporary philosophers; it, or something very much like it, has been employed in recent metaethical theorizing regarding nonnormative properties. Consider, for instance, a prominent objection to the divine command theory. Metaethicists of a wide variety of orientations have found the theory wanting because, at least in its unrestricted form, it implies that all actions (including, say, rape and torture) are morally indifferent at their core. They have no moral nature at all; a moral status is superimposed upon them only when a divine command is directed their way. But this offends against the conviction that rape and torture are not morally vacuous at their core. Their obtaining does not merely happen to come with a negative moral valence, or modally covary with such. Rather, they are *essentially* immoral. A careful consideration of what these actions are, independently of any accidental associations, reveals their moral character. Any theory that regards all actions as essentially morally indifferent is thereby starting from a false assumption. This is just what Pricean reflection teaches.

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[13] Naturally, an adequate theory of essentialist reflection will fill in various details and qualifications. For instance, we (like Price himself) maintain that the relevant answers are those provided by intuitions, and that the relevant sort of justification is defeasible (see Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau forthcoming). Unlike other participants in metaethical debates, we deny that justified beliefs about moral reality are mediated by linguistic or semantical theorizing (as in, e.g., Williamson this volume).

Now consider the following concepts:

OFFERING AID TO THOSE IN DEEP DISTRESS;

GRATUITOUSLY SLANDERING;

COMPASSIONATELY INTERVENING TO PROTECT THE OPPRESSED;

TORTURING FOR MERE ENTERTAINMENT.

We maintain that Pricean reflection reveals that these concepts are not essentially morally indifferent. Being morally valenced is not an accidental feature of these concepts, but pertains to what they are at their core.

These concepts differ dramatically from concepts such as:

SPONTANEOUSLY RECITING A POEM;

EARNESTLY STARING AT STRANGERS;

GRATUITOUSLY PROPOSING TO COUNT YOUR NEIGHBOR'S ROSES;

PLAYING VIDEO GAMES FOR MERE ENTERTAINMENT.

Pricean reflection yields a rather different verdict about these concepts: they are essentially morally indifferent. The non-normative concepts on the first list, unlike those on this second list, have moral essences. It belongs to their very core that anything that satisfies them must also satisfy concepts such as REQUIRED or WRONG, or instead FAVORED or DISFAVORED. The propositions that they constitute are essential truths regarding their constituent concepts.

The concepts on the first list are among the non-normative concepts that feature in the antecedents of a range of fixed points. We have just seen that Pricean reflection supports our contention that these concepts have moral essences. Further, we can easily repeat the exercise when reflecting on the concepts that appear in the antecedents of other fixed points—they, too, have moral essences.

We believe that Pricean reflection yields essentialist judgments that enjoy at least some justification. When the reflection is undertaken in favorable cognitive conditions, as it often is, the justification increases. Hurried or inattentive reflection may yield only a very slight degree of justification; by contrast, careful, attentive, and sober reflection will yield a higher degree of justification for the essentialist judgments that emerge. In the case of fixed points, the justification imparted by such reflection is far from conclusive. Nevertheless, it is nontrivial. And it is buttressed by the independent fact that fixed points fully accord with the four logical principles governing essence (as discussed in §2.2). Taken together, this fact and our efforts at Pricean reflection generate strong reason to believe that fixed points are essential truths, propositions that state the essences of their constituent concepts—just as the Essentialist Thesis asserts.

Some may balk at this conclusion, driven by an alternative conception of the logical form of fixed points. To appreciate this option, consider the fixed point

<It is wrong to recreationally slaughter fellow persons>.

When we lay bare its underlying structure, we find that it is equivalent to a simple conditional:

<If an action satisfies the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS, then it satisfies the concept WRONG>.

Others, though, might insist that the logical form be understood as a complex conditional along the following lines:

<If anything satisfies the concept WRONG, then if an action satisfies the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS, then it satisfies the concept WRONG>.[14]

Some, including error theorists, might then aver that the initial antecedent is necessarily false. While the falsity of this antecedent would render the fixed point true, it would also rob that fixed point of its capacity to subserve a defense of moral realism.

Fortunately, there is good reason to doubt that such complex conditionals give the correct logical form of fixed points. This becomes clear when we consider nonmoral essentialist truths, such as

<Gold has atomic number 79>.

Consider two renderings of its logical form:

<If something satisfies the concept GOLD, then it also satisfies the concept ATOMIC NUMBER 79>.

<If anything satisfies the concept ATOMIC NUMBER 79, then if something satisfies the concept GOLD, then it satisfies the concept ATOMIC NUMBER 79>.

While the first rendering in terms of a simple conditional seems to us a natural and correct construal of the original claim, the second, complex rendering strikes us as a patently implausible way of interpreting that claim. Absent any reason to think that

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[14]  See Evers and Streumer (2016, 3–4). They allow that a simple conditional gives the logical form of some propositions (e.g., <Bachelors are unmarried>), but only when those propositions do "not require more of the world than the satisfaction of the concept" in those propositions' antecedents do (5). But as shown by our example below involving gold, this restriction is mistaken.

essentialist truths and facts exhibit a different logical form depending on whether their content is moral or not (and we know of no such reason), we should accept that the moral fixed points have the logical form given by the first rendering—the one on which our defense of the essentialist claim in the Essentialist Thesis relies.

## 4. The Essentialist Conception of Conceptual Truth

We turn now to our defense of the second claim in the Essentialist Thesis: namely, that fixed points are true *fully in virtue of* essence facts regarding the concepts in their antecedents. We'll defend this claim by arguing that fixed points possess a special status: they are conceptual truths.

Since the term "conceptual truth" is open to multiple interpretations, many of which we do not wish to invoke, it is important to make clear the conception of conceptual truths to which we are committed. We call it

> **The Essentialist Conception:** <p> is a conceptual truth $=_{def}$ <p> is true fully in virtue of at least one essence fact regarding one or more of its constituent concepts.[15]

This section endeavors to clarify and defend this conception, revealing what it is and isn't committed to. We can do this by distinguishing it from other conceptions of conceptual truth on offer. That will position us to formulate an argument for the Essentialist Conception. It will also set the stage for our defense of the second claim in the Essentialist Thesis in the next section.

## 4.1 Alternative Conceptions

The Essentialist Conception differs from other widely held views regarding what it is for a proposition to be a conceptual truth. These include:

> **The Semantic Conception:** <p> is a conceptual truth $=_{def}$ <p> is true fully in virtue of its meaning.

> **The Conventionalist Conception:** <p> is a conceptual truth $=_{def}$ <p> is true fully in virtue of some practice or stipulation.

> **The Logical Conception:** <p> is a conceptual truth $=_{def}$ <p> is transformable into a logical truth by the substitution of synonyms for synonyms.

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[15] *Cp.* the similar views endorsed by Fine (1994, 9-10) and Wedgwood (2017, 20-1).

**The Psychological Conception:** <p> is a conceptual truth = $_{def}$ understanding <p> is sufficient to bear, or be disposed to bear, a certain attitude (such as belief) towards <p>.

**The Epistemic Conception:** <p> is a conceptual truth = $_{def}$ understanding <p> is sufficient to acquire a certain positive epistemic standing (such as justification) with respect to <p>.

None of these express what we mean by "conceptual truth."[16]

In fact, the Essentialist Conception does not entail any of the other five conceptions of conceptual truth. Moreover, it is importantly different from some of the other conceptions inasmuch as it does not imply that conceptual truths are somehow empty, vacuous, trivial, insubstantial, or obvious. To the contrary, the Essentialist Conception allows that some conceptual truths are substantive and nonobvious. Plausibly, it is a conceptual truth in the essentialist sense that <Justified true belief is not knowledge> or <Any Turing-computable function is recursive>; these truths are certainly substantive and, pre-Gettier and pre-Turing, were hardly obvious.

The Essentialist Conception is distinctive in that it simultaneously:

- identifies the source or ground of a conceptual truth's status as a truth (unlike the Logical, Psychological, and Epistemic Conceptions);
- is noncommittal about meaning and logic (unlike the Semantic and Logical Conceptions);
- is compatible with some conceptual truths being substantive truths (unlike the Logical, Conventionalist, and perhaps Semantic Conceptions);
- does not make conceptual truths language- or convention-relative or somehow reliant upon our practices or acts of stipulation (unlike the Conventionalist Conception);
- allows that conceptual truths can sometimes be highly nonobvious to competent thinkers (unlike the Psychological Conception);
- leaves room for genuine disagreement between competent thinkers about conceptual truths and their applications in particular instances (unlike the Psychological Conception); and
- is neutral with respect to the epistemology of conceptual truths—including both their epistemic status and how they come to have whatever epistemic status that they do (unlike the Epistemic Conception).

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[16] Sometimes the conceptions we've just listed are framed in the language of analyticity: for example, Boghossian (1996) calls the Semantic Conception "metaphysical analyticity," the Logical Conception "Frege-analyticity," and a specific version of the Epistemic Conception "epistemic analyticity." Eklund (2017, 90–1) endorses what he calls "semantic analyticity," which is basically the Psychological Conception shorn of a commitment to truth. Other conceptions are of course possible: see, e.g., Juhl and Loomis (2010, §6.5) on "analyticity*" and Soysal's (2018) discussion of "formal analyticity."

We do not maintain that the Essentialist Conception is the uniquely correct or adequate way of explicating the expression "conceptual truth," or that its distinctiveness in the just-mentioned respects makes it always preferable to the other conceptions. After all, there might be several, equally legitimate conceptions that can be useful for a variety of theoretical purposes. Still, some of these conceptions might be particularly interesting and theoretically fecund. We believe that the Essentialist Conception is both.

## 4.2 Defending the Essentialist Conception

Our defense of the legitimacy of the Essentialist Conception identifies a range of taxonomical data regarding cases of evident conceptual truths and contends that the Essentialist Conception accommodates and explains these data. To be clear, our aim is not to defend the Essentialist Conception itself, providing a good reason to believe that it is true whereas the various alternatives are false. It is rather to defend its legitimacy as a conception of conceptual truth. We do this by showing that the Essentialist Conception can accommodate and explain a range of data concerning evident conceptual truths.[17]

Our discussion focuses on evident conceptual truths for the following reason. There is bound to be a lot of disagreement about how best to think about conceptual truths. In identifying the data that should constrain inquiry regarding these truths, it will be helpful to remove ourselves from that disagreement to the extent possible, and to stick with data that are plausibly viewed as being neutral. Those data are likely to come from reflection on conceptual truths that are evident, since these are the central cases whose status is not highly contested.

We divide the data that we'll consider into two groups. The first calls attention to four nonepistemic, nonpsychological features of evident conceptual truths:

Truth: Evident conceptual truths are true.

Necessity: Evident conceptual truths are necessarily true.

Conceptuality: The truth of evident conceptual truths has something to do with the concepts that constitute them.

Paradigms: Among the evident conceptual truths, there are a range of paradigms. There are also a range of paradigms of truths that are not conceptual truths.

These data are deliberately vague. The Truth datum leaves open why conceptual truths are true. The Necessity datum does not specify which kind of necessity—logical, semantic, metaphysical, epistemic—attaches to each conceptual truth. The Conceptuality datum leaves open what it is about the constituent concepts of an evident conceptual truth that bear on its truth (or how they do so). It could be that these concepts are meanings, that

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[17] We distinguish a defense of a *thesis* from a defense of the *legitimacy of a thesis*. Whereas the former involves providing good reason to believe a given thesis, the latter merely involves establishing that a thesis accommodates and explains relevant data.

they bear certain relations to conventions, that they are suitably related to logical truths, that they have essences of certain kinds, and so on. The Paradigms datum allows that the paradigms are sparse or abundant. While this last datum itself includes no examples to help us fix our thoughts about likely candidates, the following seem to us clear cases of such truths:

    a.  <Every bachelor is unmarried>.
    b.  <Either grass is green or it is not>.
    c.  <Vermilion is a color>.

Conversely, the following seem to us clear cases of truths that are not conceptual truths:

    d.  <Nigeria is more populous than Greece>.
    e.  <Necessarily, gold has atomic number 79>.
    f.  <If the moon is made of green cheese, then pigs fly>.

The Essentialist Conception readily accommodates and explains all four of these data. It tells us that conceptual truths are true, and that they are true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding their constituent concepts; it thus accommodates and explains both Truth and Conceptuality. It does the same for Necessity, since the Essentialist Conception sees conceptual truths as a species of essential truths, which are necessarily true.[18] Finally, the Essentialist Conception accommodates and explains the fact that certain paradigms, such as (a)–(c), are conceptual truths, while others, such as (d)–(f), are not.

We turn now to the second group of data, which spell out, at a pretheoretical level, what the evidentness of evident conceptual truths entails. In other words, these four data are not marks of the evident per se, but rather the evidentness of evident conceptual truths. The four data in this second group call attention to a series of broadly epistemic-cum-psychological dimensions of evident conceptual truths:

**Reflectivity:** Evident conceptual truths are such that duly positioned agents can readily come to know them just by thinking about them.
**Bewilderment:** An agent's sincere expression of denial of an evident conceptual truth tends to induce a response akin to bewilderment in duly positioned agents.
**Comprehension:** An agent's sincere expression of denial of an evident conceptual truth provides duly positioned agents with (defeasible) epistemic reason to believe that the agent has not fully grasped this proposition.
**Classification:** An agent's sincere expression of denial of an evident conceptual truth according to which $x$ satisfies C provides duly positioned agents with (defeasible)

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[18]  Recall (from §2.1) the first logical principle governing essential truths and facts: if it belongs to the essence of $x$ that $x$ is $F$, then, necessarily, $x$ is $F$.

epistemic reason to believe that the agent would misclassify at least some things that satisfy C in actual or possible circumstances.

All four of these data refer to *duly positioned agents*, whom we define by two traits: (i) they have at least reasonable mastery of relevant concepts and (ii) they occupy favorable cognitive conditions (e.g., of sobriety and attentiveness) that enable such agents to readily apply those concepts correctly.[19] Furthermore, as noted, each of these data identifies a mark of an evident conceptual truth; any proposition that exemplifies all four features recorded here is an excellent candidate for being such a truth.

The Essentialist Conception arguably comports with all four of these data (both individually and jointly). Keeping in mind that favorable cognitive conditions may include sustained and careful reflection, an evident proposition that is true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding one or more of its constituent concepts is compatible with its being knowable by mere reflection by a duly positioned agent (per Reflectivity). The Essentialist Conception is similarly compatible with the idea that denial of a conceptual truth will tend to induce bewilderment, puzzlement, or bafflement in a duly positioned agent who has grasped it (per Bewilderment). Such an agent would thereby gain reason to question the denier's grasp of the proposition in question (per Comprehension), as well as the denier's ability to successfully deliver relevant classifications (per Classification)—including those that involve further applications of that proposition's constituent concepts.

We've claimed that the Essentialist Conception accommodates and explains all four of the data regarding central cases of evident conceptual truths and is consonant with a range of data concerning the evidentness of such truths. These are nontrivial considerations in favor of regarding the Essentialist Conception as a legitimate conception of conceptual truth. Together, we take them to compose a strong defense of that claim.

## 4.3 A Further Mark

Thus far we have been working with data that are indicators or marks of evident conceptual truths, on any of the conceptions of conceptual truth we've canvassed. But there may also be conception-specific marks of conceptual truth. For example, the Conventionalist Conception calls attention to the idea that some propositions are true fully in virtue of certain conventions. On this view, that a given truth reflects various conventions is a mark of being a conceptual truth *under that conception*. Such possession is not, however, an indicator of being a conceptual truth per se.

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[19] We'll have much more to say about the notion of concept mastery in §6, below. Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (forthcoming) present a fuller theory.

There may be multiple marks of being a conceptual truth according to the Essentialist Conception. Here we draw attention to an important one given our aims—that of possessing *framework status*. We'll properly explicate this notion below; for now, we can stick with the intuitive idea that having such status is a matter of being a non-negotiable element of a set of propositions of a certain kind. The basic idea is that when we want to identify a set of propositions belonging to a given category, we can look to the conceptual truths generated by the essences of the central concepts of the category in question—those propositions that are true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding those concepts—to assist us in this matter. While a proposition's having this mark is neither necessary nor sufficient for its being a conceptual truth, it is nonetheless good (albeit defeasible) evidence of a proposition's counting as such under the auspices of the Essentialist Conception, at least when the proposition also satisfies sufficiently many data regarding conceptual truths per se.

## 5.  THE MORAL FIXED POINTS AS CONCEPTUAL TRUTHS

In the last section, we introduced and defended the Essentialist Conception of conceptual truths, identifying a number of marks pertaining to conceptual truths along the way. In this section, we defend the claim that fixed points are conceptual truths of the kind described by the Essentialist Conception. We do so by appeal to the *Conceptual Truth Argument*.

Its first premise states:

1.  Fixed points are essential truths with respect to their constituent concepts.

We defended this premise in §3. Since we won't assume that all essential truths are grounded in corresponding essence facts (recall note 10), premise 1 can't be relied upon to deliver the claim that fixed points are true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding their constituent concepts. Indeed, this premise does not by itself support classifying those platitudes as conceptual truths under any conception, including the Essentialist Conception. Two further premises begin to bridge this gap:

2.  Fixed points satisfy the Truth, Necessity, Conceptuality, Reflectivity, Bewilderment, Comprehension, and Classification data.
3.  Fixed points do not contravene the Paradigms datum.

The conjunction of these two premises provides defeasible evidence in favor of the claim that fixed points are conceptual truths, no matter the conception of conceptual truths one is operating with. When combined with premise 1 and

4. Fixed points have framework status with respect to morality,

these premises provide strong evidence for (and arguably entail) the conclusion that

5. Fixed points are conceptual truths of the kind described by the Essentialist Conception: each is true fully in virtue of at least one essence fact regarding one or more of its constituent concepts.

In concert, then, the four premises provide good reason to believe 5.

As noted, we've had our say about premise 1. Let us turn now to a defense of the remaining premises in the argument.

## 5.1 Evidence of Conceptual Truth

Premise 2 identifies seven data regarding evident conceptual truths that fixed points satisfy (i.e., they possess the features that those data identify). Let's consider these data in order.

That fixed points are true (per the Truth datum) follows from their being platitudes in the sense specified in §1. Moreover, we've defended the claim that they are essential truths; this is the upshot of our Pricean reflections in §3. Now recall, from §2.1, that essential truths have modal force: if it belongs to the essence of $x$ that $x$ is $F$, then, necessarily, $x$ is $F$. Thus fixed points, being essential truths, are also necessary (per the Necessity datum).[20] So we can tick the first two boxes.

Regarding the third datum, we've defended the claim that fixed points are essential truths *with respect to their constituent concepts*. If our discussion there is on target, it does not imply the conclusion we ultimately seek, namely, that fixed points are true in virtue of those concepts. But it does entail that the truth of fixed points has *something* to do with the concepts that constitute them (per the Conceptuality datum).

We've also, fourthly, defended the claim that agents can grasp the morally valenced essences of the concepts in the antecedents of fixed points, such as RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS; this, once again, is the contribution of Pricean reflection, coupled with the observation that the fixed points fully accord with the four logical principles governing essence. In this way, agents are able to appreciate, via reflection alone, that anything satisfying the antecedent concept of a fixed point also satisfies the moral concept in its consequent. It follows that such agents can readily come to know fixed points just by thinking about them (per the Reflectivity datum).

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[20] Recall that the platitudes may be defeasible. If so, then they are essentially so. On such a view, what is necessary is (for example) that any action that satisfies the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER defeasibly satisfies the concept WRONG.

As for the fifth and sixth data invoked by premise 2, we recognize that philosophy is replete with positions that deny highly evident claims, even platitudinous ones. But we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the sincere denial of highly evident propositions such as <Justice is a virtue> and <Recreational slaughter of fellow persons is wrong> tends to induce a response akin to bewilderment in those who have reasonable mastery of their constituent concepts and occupy favorable cognitive conditions (per Bewilderment). We recognize the possibility of contexts in which the tendency in question will be stymied, as when others are aware that the denier possesses highly unorthodox theoretical commitments. But even so, the tendency remains.

Thus it is no surprise that we look for explanations of why an agent would sincerely deny evident truths, and we form expectations about what else they will deny or believe. Consider an agent who sincerely denies that there is anything wrong with recreational slaughter. In contexts outside the philosophy seminar room, and perhaps even within it, that provides defeasible reason to believe that his failure must be deep; it is arguably that of simply failing to grasp the proposition <It is wrong to recreationally slaughter fellow persons>. Moreover, this failure would presumably betoken a grasp of the constituents of this proposition that would lead this person to issue similar denials when it comes to other fixed points, and to issue erroneous verdicts about various actual and hypothetical cases. His error would not likely be entirely isolated or local, but would rather be indicative of a tendency to misclassify many other phenomena. It follows that fixed points also satisfy the seventh and final datum (per the Classification datum).

Having defended premise 2 of the Conceptual Truth Argument, let us now turn to premise 3. Suppose fixed points were similar to paradigmatic nonconceptual truths such as <The Uffizi houses the *Birth of Venus*>. That would be reason to believe that fixed points are not conceptual truths of any sort; they would contravene the Paradigms datum (i.e., fail to possess the feature identified by that datum). However, while fixed points are not paradigms of conceptual truths, neither are they paradigms of nonconceptual truths. This last point ensures that fixed points do not themselves contravene the Paradigms datum, as the third premise claims.

But might our principal claim—that fixed points are conceptual truths—imply or license violations of the Paradigms datum? Since some critics have charged as much, it is worth pausing to explain why the view we've developed does not illicitly recast paradigm nonconceptual truths as conceptual ones. We'll focus on three instances of these worries.

The first alleges that if fixed points are conceptual truths, then this implies that the proposition

A. <Moral properties exist or are instantiated>

is as well.[21]

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[21]  Copp (2017, 23) raises this objection; *cp.* Copp (2007, 126–7).

The second alleges that any view according to which fixed points are conceptual truths must allow that a proposition such as

B. <God rewards the benevolent>

is a conceptual truth, which in turn implies that

C. <God exists>

is a conceptual truth.[22]

The third alleges that any view according to which fixed points are conceptual truths must allow that there could be "anti-moralist" conceptual truths, such as:

D. <Recreationally slaughtering fellow persons is required>.[23]

We agree that no satisfactory position should imply or support the claim that A–D are conceptual truths. We also see no reason to believe that our position suggests otherwise. To appreciate why, recall the logical form of the fixed point that we'll call "No Slaughter":

<If an act satisfies the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS, then it satisfies the concept WRONG>.

This conditional proposition does not imply or support A, let alone the claim that A is true fully in virtue of essence facts regarding its constituent concepts, as it must if it were a conceptual truth under the Essentialist Conception.[24]

Similarly, if B has any chance of being a conceptual truth, it would have the logical form:

B*. <If something satisfies the concept GOD, then it satisfies the concept REWARDS THE BENEVOLENT>.

But B* does not imply C, let alone offer any support to the claim that C is a conceptual truth.[25] Moreover, for B to be a conceptual truth under the Essentialist Conception, B*

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[22] Evers and Streumer (2016, 3) raise this objection.

[23] Both Copp (2017, 18–21) and Evers and Streumer (2016, 5–6) press this objection.

[24] Copp (2017, 23) notes that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau (2014, 414n33) anticipate and reply to the objection. But he maintains that the reply is unsatisfactory, since "it does follow [from the claim that No Slaughter is a conceptual truth] that recreational slaughter is wrong" and that "recreational slaughter is wrong only if there is such a thing as wrongness." This claim, however, strikes us as failing to take into account the conditional logical form of propositions such as No Slaughter.

[25] It might be that critics assume that the logical form of B is really <If something satisfies the concept BENEVOLENT, then it satisfies the concept GOD REWARDS IT>. But this proposition also does not imply

must both state an essential truth regarding at least one of B's constituent concepts, and be true fully in virtue of an essence fact regarding that concept (or those concepts). Our position licenses neither conjunct, and it is far from evident that either conjunct is true. So our claim that fixed points such as No Slaughter are conceptual truths doesn't support or imply the idea that B is a conceptual truth.

As for putative "antimoralist" conceptual truths, our view implies that there could be none. After all, according to our position, it belongs to the *essence* of the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS that anything that satisfies it must also satisfy the concept WRONG. Given the plausible assumption that no act could at once satisfy incompatible concepts, such as REQUIRED and WRONG, it follows that D could not be true, let alone be a conceptual truth.

Of course none of this as such rules out the possibility of there being alternative normative concepts, such as REQUIRED* and WRONG*, whose application conditions diverge sharply from REQUIRED and WRONG. There are many things to say about this possibility.[26] For present purposes, let us say simply that REQUIRED* and WRONG* are philosophers' inventions, and absent a lot of additional information, it is very difficult to gain any grip on what belongs to their essences. Moreover, it is not credible to suppose that such inventiveness can make it the case that the essences of the non-normative concepts in the antecedents of fixed points make reference to one or another of these invented concepts. For example, there is no plausibility to the suggestion that we can simply *stipulate* that it belongs to the essence of RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS that the proposition

<Recreational slaughter of fellow persons is required*>

is an essential truth regarding the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS, or that this proposition is true fully in virtue of an essence fact regarding this concept. While our powers of creation are extensive, they are not so far-reaching as to allow philosophers to craft the essences of familiar concepts of intentional actions by fiat. If that is so, then there could be no normative conceptual truths involving familiar concepts such as RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER OF FELLOW PERSONS and unfamiliar normative concepts such as REQUIRED* and WRONG* that parallel fixed points. Our conclusion is that examples such as these provide no reason to believe that our claim that fixed

that C is a conceptual truth. Nor is there anything about the essence of the concept BENEVOLENT that implies something about God, let alone that God exists—or at least we know of no credible arguments to the contrary. Whether there is something about the concept GOD that implies that God exists is famously somewhat more controversial, but it is no objection to our position that it fails to have any implications regarding the issue.

[26] Both Copp and Evers and Streumer explicitly raise the possibility in the course of their criticisms (*cp*. Eklund 2017). Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau (2024, Chapter 11, §3) address the possibility in greater detail.

points are conceptual truths has untoward implications. In particular, the examples do not support the charge that our claim contravenes the Paradigms datum.

We've now defended premises 2 and 3 of the Conceptual Truth Argument. Together, these premises provide reason to believe that fixed points are conceptual truths of some sort. The issue that remains is whether these platitudes are conceptual truths of the sort countenanced by the Essentialist Conception. The conjunction of premise 1, which we already defended, and premise 4, to which we turn next, helps to deliver this conclusion.

## 5.2 Framework Status

Premise 4 states that fixed points have framework status with respect to morality. We indicated earlier that such status attaches to propositions that somehow "frame" a given category, standing as non-negotiable elements of it. Otherwise put, these propositions somehow "fix the subject matter" or "hold in place" other propositions that belong to that category. It's now time to unpack these metaphors. Our aim in doing so is not to prioritize morality over other categories, but rather to defend the claim about fixed points in premise 4.

Let us call a reasonably comprehensive and consistent body of propositions a "system" of propositions, and a system of propositions with regard to a category C a "C-system." We propose that

A nonempty set of propositions {P} has framework status with respect to C if:
- all members of {P} are paradigmatic truths of C;
- a system that omitted {P} would be either a radically incomplete C-system or not a C-system at all;
- a system that included the negation of each member of {P} would be either a highly deviant C-system or not a C-system at all; and,
- a system that included any proposition that is inconsistent with a range of members of {P} would be either a highly deviant C-system or not a C-system at all.

Satisfaction of these four conditions is sufficient for a set of propositions to be a non-negotiable element of a given category, framing that category, fixing its subject matter, holding other propositions in place, and so on.

Consider, for example, the category of love. Candidates for propositions with framework status with regard to this category might be:

<An agent loves another only if she is concerned with the well-being of that other>.

<An agent loves another only if she is disposed to seek a conscious, meaningful relationship with that other in at least some circumstances>.

<An agent loves another only if she is committed to not wronging the other>.

These are good candidates for being paradigmatic truths about love. If they are such truths, then a system of propositions that failed to include these would either be radically incomplete, leaving out some of its significant elements, or not a system regarding love at all. If a system were instead to include the negation of these propositions, or other propositions that are inconsistent with a range of those like the ones just retailed, then it would at best offer a highly deviant conception of the category and, at worst, lose its claim to being a system regarding love.

We believe that fixed points satisfy the four conditions on framework status with respect to the category of the moral. They are paradigmatic moral truths—exemplary, obvious instances of the category. Further, any set of propositions that failed to include fixed points, or that included their negations or other propositions that are inconsistent with a range of them, would be either a radically incomplete moral system, a deviant one, or no moral system at all.

Sharon Street, who is no fan of moral realism, seems to concur with our verdict that certain platitudes possess framework status with respect to morality. When considering a case of wanton torture, she writes:

> For of course refraining from torture is what Caligula has most *moral* reason to do; one might think this is close to a conceptual truth about what morality consists in, since any "morality" that gave a green light to maximizing the suffering of others for fun would be hard to recognize as a system of *morality* at all.[27]

We see no bar to extending Street's insight to the set of fixed points. In our terms, they possess framework status with respect to morality, just as premise 4 says.

Our goal is to utilize this point about the framework status of fixed points in order to help us make the case that they are conceptual truths under the Essentialist Conception. When a set of propositions possesses framework status with respect to a given category and is also such that its members both are essential truths with respect to concepts belonging to that category and satisfy the seven data pertaining to evident conceptual truths, then we have a good, albeit defeasible, indicator of their being conceptual truths according to the Essentialist Conception. The defense of this claim is abductive: Why does a set of propositions—such as the fixed points—with framework status satisfy the seven data and contain only essential truths with respect to concepts belonging to that category? Because those propositions are true in virtue of essence facts regarding these propositions' constituent concepts, and so are conceptual truths under the Essentialist Conception.

This concludes our defense of the premises of the Conceptual Truth Argument. If this defense has been successful, then there is strong reason to regard fixed points as conceptual truths.

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[27]  Street (2009, 292).

## 6. Diagnosing Doubt and Denial

We are well aware of the skepticism that is likely to greet our claim that moral fixed points are conceptual truths. Perhaps the most important worry about our proposal is its implication—which we'll highlight in a moment—that those who reject fixed points thereby suffer from conceptual deficiencies. This section responds to these worries. Specifically, we wish to address a set of questions regarding whether, how, and to what extent rational doubt or denial of any fixed point is possible, given our claim that they are conceptual truths.

If fixed points are conceptual truths, then we allow that there is a sense in which those who doubt or deny them suffer from a *conceptual deficiency*. As we understand it, there are two main types of conceptual deficiency. After elucidating each type, we will then illustrate how they help to diagnose doubt and denial.

### 6.1 Two Types of Conceptual Deficiency

Let's begin with a type of conceptual deficiency we'll call "imperfect concept possession," which concerns whether and how one grasps a given concept. Such grasp may be better or worse along (at least) two dimensions. We can illustrate using the concept RAINFOREST. One *incompletely* grasps this concept when the possibility of a temperate rainforest is not yet within one's purview. One grasps this concept *incorrectly* if one's grasp conforms to the condition that RAINFOREST refers only to wooded areas near the Equator that are under threat. Both imply imperfect possession of the concept.

It is helpful to distinguish three levels of concept possession. At one extreme lies *perfect mastery* of a concept; at the opposite extreme, just short of complete lack of a concept, lies *mere possession* of it (as when a child memorizes a mathematical proposition whose constituent concepts she does not yet master in any interesting sense). In between lies *reasonable mastery*, which is the kind of competence with a concept that one possesses when one grasps its basic or paradigm applications. Exemplified in many exercises of ordinary human cognition, reasonable mastery is compatible with a host of classificatory gaps (as in the case of incomplete grasp) and mistakes (as in the case of incorrect grasp).[28] The first main type of conceptual deficiency—imperfect concept possession—is found in cases of mere possession as well as various forms of reasonable mastery.

A second main type of conceptual deficiency is what we'll call "performance error," which concerns one's exercise of one's grasp of a concept. Just as an athlete may possess

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[28] This is not to say that correct or reliable application in belief or judgment is necessary for reasonable mastery. This is one important implication of some of the examples described by Burge (1979 and 1990), Williamson (2006), and Bealer (2008).

a skill but, due to injury or nerves, fail to exercise that skill in a range of situations, one may have reasonable or even perfect mastery of a concept but fail to exercise that mastery in various circumstances, owing to nontrivial cognitive impediments. Among these are drunkenness, nervousness, inattention to details, emotional associations, or forgetfulness. Or one may simply fail to appreciate or follow through on the basic implications of a concept or its application to a particular case—perhaps because one is convinced of a claim or set of claims that have deeply revisionist implications.

It is worth stressing three points about our treatment of conceptual deficiency. First, it does not imply that conceptually deficient agents are "abusing concepts"[29] or conceptually confused in the sense that they are disposed to apply the relevant concepts arbitrarily or indiscriminately, or would have seriously muddled thoughts involving them. Second, our treatment is compatible with the point, emphasized above, that not all conceptual truths are obviously true or evident; they can be cognitively accessible to different degrees (including: not at all). Many conceptual truths are substantive, nontautologous truths; questioning or denying them need not, therefore, be chalked up to failure to see what's before one's nose. Third, and relatedly, our treatment does not imply that beliefs based on or influenced by conceptual deficiency are always irrational or unjustified: nonevident conceptual truths may be doubted or denied for a variety of genuine or merely apparent reasons.

We realize that some will regard our treatment of conceptual deficiency as fairly capacious. But such latitude is perfectly legitimate: imperfect concept possession and performance errors each generate ways in which one might come to violate or fail to respect a conceptual truth (as understood not only by the Essentialist Conception but by several of the others we canvassed). It thus seems appropriate to regard them as types of conceptual deficiency.

## 6.2 The Diagnosis

We are now in a position to diagnose doubt and denial of fixed points. As noted, if they are conceptual truths, then we should say that those who doubt or deny them suffer from a conceptual deficiency. Such a deficiency would consist in either

    i. *lacking* the relevant concepts;
    ii. possessing the relevant concepts but having an *incomplete grasp* of some of them;
    iii. possessing the relevant concepts but having an *incorrect grasp* of some of them; or
    iv. possessing the relevant concepts (perhaps even having a correct and complete grasp of them) but *failing to apply them accurately* in all-things-considered judgment.

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[29] The expression is employed by Zangwill (2000, 281).

While (ii)–(iii) identify conceptual deficiencies that fall under the rubric of imperfect concept possession, (iv) concerns a conceptual deficiency that is best classed as performance error.

Let us begin with a diagnosis of some simple cases of conceptual deficiency that may not yet implicate any actual agents. Suppose that one brings the fixed point we've labeled No Slaughter to mind but fails to carefully attend to the concept RECREATIONAL SLAUGHTER—for example, one inattentively neglects the restriction to instances of *recreational* slaughter. This might lead to a performance error that results in one doubting whether the action is wrong. Or suppose one registers this restriction but mistakenly conceives of the domain of the recreational as encompassing any physically demanding activity, regardless of whether it's undertaken simply for entertainment. Suppose, further, that one conceives of slaughter as nothing other than mass killing. If one accepts that engaging in physically demanding mass killing in self-defense is morally justified, one may be led to doubt the truth of the platitude. In such a case, one will doubt a conceptual truth because of a conceptual deficiency that is explained by an incorrect grasp of the concept RECREATIONAL and an incomplete grasp of the concept SLAUGHTER.

Turning now to a different type of case, one that might be more likely to be realized, suppose one were to wonder whether one has failed to appreciate the force of various arguments against moral realism, such as those that J. L. Mackie offers for moral error theory.[30] One might find that such worries—for instance, how could the world that science describes also include values not of our own creation?—loom large enough in one's thinking that they eclipse the evidentness of the platitude, moving one to discount its apparent obviousness, due to the judgment that the overall balance of reasons is tipped against it. Or suppose one were to wonder whether there is something deeply defective about our moral concepts, something that would render them incapable of referring to moral properties if any were to exist (say, because their application is subject to extensive disagreement).[31] Again, this worry might operate on one's thinking in such a way that it also leads one to doubt or deny the platitude. Or, to take another—and much darker—example, suppose one is like the Nazi war criminal Herman Göring, who seems to have rejected certain platitudes when ordering a genocide simply on the grounds of love of country. The evidentness of the platitudes may have been concealed by his nationalistic fervor, together perhaps with his ruinous conceptions of his leader and of those whom he ordered to be slaughtered.

Two comments on these examples. First, given the circumstances in which the agents in these cases find themselves, some of their doubt or denial might not be irrational. Indeed, whether such doubt or denial is irrational may be decidable only on a case by case basis, through a careful examination of the particularities of the doubter's or denier's overall epistemic situation.[32]

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[30] Mackie (1977, ch. 1).

[31] See, e.g., Loeb's (2008) discussion of "moral incoherentism."

[32] Contrary to Ingram (2015). Copp (2007, ch. 4) offers three arguments for thinking that propositions such as fixed points are not conceptual truths. We addressed one of these arguments in §5.1 above. The

Second, the types of cases just described should strike most of us as familiar. Several of them exemplify a dynamic of doubt that is not uncommon when engaging in philosophy and other kinds of abstract reflection. While attending to the proposition that there are two prime numbers between 4 and 9, it is very difficult to see how there could be no numbers. But then one steps back and wonders whether Hartry Field's arguments for numerical nihilism might have bite.[33] While attending to the law of noncontradiction, one finds it impossible to see how there could be true contradictions. But then one is introduced to the Liar Paradox and becomes open to the possibility, perhaps in light of Graham Priest's arguments, that dialetheism might be correct.[34] In each of these cases, one acknowledges, as some nihilists and dialetheists do, that although a proposition seems highly evident, it might nonetheless be false.

Of course, Field and Priest go beyond these doubts to embrace genuine belief with respect to numerical nihilism and dialetheism, respectively. These philosophers may even acknowledge that the propositions they deny—<There are two prime numbers between 4 and 9> and <Contradictions cannot be true>—seem highly evident; still, they maintain that the propositions are nonetheless false. Such denials need not impugn the rationality of these thinkers. The same could be true of those who deny No Slaughter and other fixed points.

We go further. Even those who do not deny fixed points and are not tempted by the dynamic of doubt should acknowledge a sense in which these propositions *might* be false. Compare a highly reflective mathematician's avowal that (say) Fermat's Last Theorem might be false, even though it seems to her to be obviously true and she is aware that the community of mathematicians considers it to have now been proven. It is plausible to interpret her as avowing that she is uncertain that Fermat's Last Theorem is true, because she recognizes that even falsehoods can seem highly evident, and acknowledges that she cannot rule out the possibility that what has been accepted as a proof contains unnoticed errors. There is nothing incoherent or irrational about such an expression of humility, which is consonant with common sense, and which we intend as a perfect analogue of our own concession that there is a sense in which fixed points *might* be false. That a proposition might be false in this sense is not, however, a good reason to doubt, let alone deny, its status as a conceptual truth. On the contrary, we submit that the Conceptual Truth Argument provides strong reason to believe that a wide range of substantive moral propositions possess that very status.[35]

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other two arguments hinge on the claim that it is not incoherent to deny them. Since, as we've now argued, our view does not imply that it is, these two arguments do not make contact with our position.

[33] Field (1980 and 1989).

[34] Priest (1987).

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