

Kieran Setiya

Knowing Right from Wrong.

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This short book offers an innovative defense of the possibility of moral knowledge against three skeptical challenges to the effect that our access to moral truth depends on epistemic luck. It is therefore a work in moral epistemology. However, it will probably engage epistemologists more than metaethicists, since Setiya discusses at great length views on epistemic disagreement, reliability, justification, and knowledge. The book is definitely not accessible to non-specialists, both because it weaves a complex line of argument and because it presupposes deep familiarity with a number of current scholarly debates.

In addition to a preface and an introduction, the book consists of four chapters that deal with three skeptical problems: moral disagreement (Chapter 1), reliability and coincidence (Chapter 2), and knowledge and accidental truth (Chapters 3 and 4). I will focus mainly on the first chapter.

The discussion of moral disagreement takes account of a very small part of the metaethical literature on the subject, focusing instead on the current epistemological debate about the significance of disagreement between epistemic peers. (Epistemic peers are commonly defined as individuals who share approximately the same evidence bearing on the disputed issue and have roughly the same intellectual skills.) Setiya critically examines the Equal Weight View (EWV), according to which in the face of peer disagreement one should suspend judgment about the matter under dispute. In rejecting this view, he sides with Thomas Kelly, who maintains that EWV mistakenly implies that the first-order evidence should be ignored and that we must only attend to the disagreement itself, thus disregarding who has appropriately responded to the original evidence. In line with Kelly, Setiya argues that, if the first-order evidence supports my belief before I meet my dissenter, then the epistemic asymmetry is real and there is thus no reason for me to compromise, not even after realizing that my dissenter will reason in the same way as I do. The problem with Kelly and Setiya's position is that what the epistemic peers disagree about is precisely the evaluation of the first-order evidence: each party tries to offer compelling reasons in favor of their own evaluation of that evidence. If I just claimed, in the face of a peer dispute, 'I am right because the evidence in fact supports my view', I would beg the question against my epistemic peer and against the skeptic who calls attention to the apparent epistemic symmetry between the disputants. To my mind, becoming aware that my epistemic peer can reason in the same way I do seems to require that I lower my degree of confidence in my view.

Having argued that one should stick to one's guns in the face of peer disagreement, Setiya examines what kind of evidence we have for our moral beliefs. He considers and rejects three theories of moral justification—namely, intuitionism, coherentism, and reflective equilibrium—on the basis that, when confronted with disagreement, they lead to either skepticism or epistemic egoism. Setiya's own alternative is what he calls Reductive Epistemology (RE), according to which the evidence for moral beliefs is ultimately non-ethical in that it is evidence for the facts on which ethical truth supervenes. Ethical supervenience is defined thus: 'If an act or agent falls under ethical concept E, it does so in virtue of falling under non-ethical concepts, N, such that, necessarily, what falls under N falls under E' (49). Setiya makes three important remarks. First, the evidence in question is evidence that x falls under N, not evidence for the conditional, if x is N,

then x is E. Second, it is not implied by RE that the evidence is dialectically efficacious, i.e., able to persuade those who disagree. Third, if the above conditional is justified, then it too is based on evidence; however, '[a]lthough I have it, this further evidence may go beyond what I could cite or what figures in the content of my beliefs' (50). In this regard, at the outset of Chapter 2 Setiya will reply to the objection that, in order to be justified in believing p on the basis of evidence q , one must be antecedently justified in believing the conditional, if q then p , by arguing that the kind of justification that may be antecedently required is propositional, not doxastic.

According to Setiya, RE solves the problem of fundamental moral disagreement without falling into epistemic egoism because 'the beliefs of those who are right are not only true but what the evidence supports' (52). Hence, if they meet a stranger who disagrees in fundamental ways (he believes, e.g., that one should act on one's final desires and be utterly selfish), the situation is asymmetric because his 'beliefs are not only false, but go against the evidence—non-ethical descriptions of the world—on which both sides agree' (52). Once again, Setiya seems to be begging the question. First, what an epistemic rival who is my peer and who like myself accepts ethical supervenience disagrees about is precisely whether the non-ethical facts support my moral belief or his. Second, what the disagreement-based skeptic about moral knowledge calls into question is that one can settle a moral disagreement simply by claiming that one is in fact right. Finally, what the sort of moral skeptic who adopts a moral error theory denies is that an action or agent falling under some non-moral concept N necessarily falls under some moral concept E, since he believes that no action instantiates a moral concept. Setiya might retort by reminding us both (a) that he never claimed dialectical efficacy and (b) that he is concerned with the kind of skeptic who denies that moral facts can be known, not that they exist (4). In reply to (a), one should note that, by writing the present book and offering anti-skeptical arguments, Setiya has gotten himself into the dialectical game of philosophical debate. In reply to (b), one might remark that skepticism about moral reality is related to skepticism about moral knowledge: if there are no moral facts, there is no moral knowledge, for there are no moral facts to be known.

While in Chapter 1 Setiya argues that the evidence that justifies our moral beliefs is non-ethical, in Chapter 2 he examines when and how this happens. He endorses a form of reliabilism according to which, in forming an evidentially justified moral belief, one manifests a reliable disposition 'to form beliefs of one kind on the basis of others in a way that tracks, at least roughly, the conditionals involved in Ethical Supervenience' (65). He then addresses the skeptical argument according to which moral realism makes our reliability in ethics a sheer coincidence because the claim that moral facts are independent of moral beliefs entails that there is an inexplicable correlation between them. Such inexplicability undermines the justification of our moral beliefs. Setiya argues that, even if one cannot offer an explanation for a coincidence, one is nonetheless justified in accepting it if one has sufficient evidence of its occurrence. In the case of ethics, this evidence is the fact that we have true moral beliefs. Why does appealing to the truth of our moral beliefs as evidence of our moral reliability not beg the question? Because, according to RE, the evidence for our moral beliefs is ultimately non-ethical, and so the truth of those beliefs is grounded on non-ethical facts. Thus, moral beliefs 'are intermediate steps in an argument for reliability, not its ultimate ground' (82). Even if one concedes that this move is successful against the skeptical argument in question, it still begs the question against the moral skeptic who rejects ethical supervenience.

Chapter 3 is concerned with a skeptical argument related to that addressed in the previous chapter: if moral facts are independent of our moral beliefs, then it is an accident that our moral beliefs are true, in which case we cannot claim to know those facts. It is thus necessary to explain

how our reliability in ethics is non-accidental. According to Setiya, when S knows that p , he knows it by a reliable method m , and he uses m because it is reliable. Our non-accidental use of reliable methods in ethics can only be explained, without appealing to God, if our moral beliefs are constitutively bound to moral facts. In a passage that carries no dialectical force whatsoever against the skeptic, he tells us: ‘Since I know that torture is wrong, that courage is a virtue, that there is reason to care about people other than oneself, and since I think that you know it, too, constitutive independence has to go’ (115). Setiya then examines certain forms of two constitutive theories, constructivism and externalism, concluding that they either lead to relativism or posit an unacceptable amount of convergence in moral thought that cannot account for moral disagreement between individuals and/or moral disagreement between whole communities—i.e., they cannot account for the fact that individuals and even whole communities may go wrong.

In the final chapter, Setiya maintains that, in order to make sense of ethical knowledge without social convergence, we need to assume that moral facts are bound to our moral beliefs through the natural history of human life—a view that can be couched in terms of either *natural* externalism or *natural* constructivism, although he expresses preference for the former. Human beings are by nature disposed to believe the truth in ethics when their beliefs are non-ethically well-informed, i.e., when they have reliable evidence of the facts on which ethical truth supervenes. But human nature is plastic enough to allow for exceptions: it is part of our natural history that certain adverse conditions prevent the realization of human nature, which explains why some or many of us go astray in our moral beliefs. Setiya then goes on to reject the idea that, given that the skeptical argument from Chapter 3 bears specifically on moral knowledge, we could renounce moral knowledge but save justified moral belief. The reason is that justified belief should be regarded as the perhaps imperfect manifestation of a capacity to know, so that, if we lacked such a capacity altogether, not only moral knowledge but also justified moral belief would be impossible.

At various points in the book, Setiya acknowledges that some of his positions are disputable or that his accounts of certain issues are hypothetical. This intellectual honesty-cum-modesty reaches its peak at the end of the book, where he recognizes that the meager empirical evidence at our disposal neither undermines nor supports his view, and expresses ‘hope’ and ‘faith’ that human beings are by nature reliable in ethics, i.e., that the conditions for moral knowledge are met (155–8). Though this admission is commendable, it can be interpreted as an unwilling recognition that his refutation of ethical skepticism is in the end merely tentative, and hence far from conclusive.

Despite the above reservations about the efficacy of its anti-skeptical argumentation, Setiya’s book is no doubt an original and provocative contribution to moral epistemology.

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