

Taking Morality Seriously, by David Enoch (Oxford University Press, 2011)
Reviewed by Richard Joyce for *Ethics* 123 (2013).

[penultimate draft]

Crispin Wright once wrote that “a philosopher who asserts that she is a realist ... has probably, for most philosophical audiences, accomplished little more than to clear her throat” (1992: 1). In an attempt to impose some precision, it has become usual to distinguish minimal realism (according to which a discourse is assertoric and sometimes true) from robust realism (which adds that the truths in question are objective). The Robust Realism that David Enoch advocates in *Taking Morality Seriously* goes even further (hence the capital letters), requiring that moral truths are irreducibly normative—that is, he advocates metaethical non-naturalistic realism. Thus certain views that we have come to think of as “robustly realist”—e.g., Cornell realism—are categorized as opponents to Enoch’s position.

The book is inventive and honest and clear. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately, depending on one’s perspective) this very clarity allows one to see where the master arguments stumble. Enoch is refreshingly candid about these weaknesses. The book closes with a striking and welcome decision to list the points of the project to which he confesses a lack of confidence. Would that all philosophy books ended in this manner!

In chapters 2 and 3 Enoch offers two positive arguments designed to support Robust Realism, both roughly of the form that Robust Realism is necessary if we are to take morality seriously. Let me describe them in turn.

Chapter 2 presents the *argument from the moral implications of metaethical objectivity*. The argument begins with a premise Enoch calls IMPARTIALITY, which is the moral principle that in cases of interpersonal conflict (e.g., you want us to play tennis and I want us to go to a movie) it is wrong to stand one’s ground; rather, some kind of egalitarian compromise ought to be sought. The second premise is that factual disagreements do not have this characteristic. If you and I are defusing a bomb, and I’m confident that we should cut the blue wire whereas you claim we should cut the red wire, then I’m not required to offer a compromise solution (like tossing a coin). The third premise is to note that cases of *moral* disagreement seem more like factual disagreements: it appears permissible to stand one’s ground on a moral commitment. The conclusion is that moral judgments cannot be derived from mere preferences, for moral disagreements are guided by norms by which preference disagreements are not guided. Enoch hopes to use this conclusion to knock certain metaethical views out of the field: namely, subjectivism, response-dependent views of morality, and expressivism.

Of course, even if successful (and it is very far from obvious that it is) the argument won’t establish Robust Realism, since all versions of naturalistic realism remain in play. Error theoretic views also remain in play, since the error theorist is committed to the denial of the first premise. (Enoch takes some pot shots at error theory here, but largely saves his powder for later chapters.) Basically, any metaethical view that denies that moral disagreements are disagreements over preferences—of which there are many—survives chapter 2 unscathed.

Chapter 3 presents the *argument from the deliberative indispensability of irreducibly*

normative truths. Here Enoch draws inspiration from explanatory indispensability arguments in metaphysics, whereby one is forced (or at least permitted) to admit something into one's ontology in order to explain some observable phenomena. One could, of course, directly pursue such an argument in an attempt to establish the existence of moral facts (e.g., Nicholas Sturgeon's arguments against Gilbert Harman); but this is not how Enoch proceeds. Rather, he argues that we must admit normative facts into our conceptual scheme not in order to explain something but in order that we may participate in an activity that we cannot rationally opt out of: the deliberative project.

When one deliberates over any practical matter (e.g., should I go to law school?) one presupposes that some answers are better than others. Generally one is not trying to make an arbitrary decision, or thinking of one's choice as somehow determining the correctness conditions; rather, one conceives of the correct answer(s) as there to be uncovered. "[B]y deliberating, you commit yourself to there being relevant reasons, and so to there being relevant normative truths. ... Normative truths are thus indispensable for deliberation" (75). Note that in this chapter Enoch has broadened his target away from *moral* truths, to the broader category of *normative* truths. Thus he is not at this point attempting to establish Robust Metaethical Realism, but rather Robust Metanormative Realism.

But as with chapter 2, I worry about how much has really been excluded by the argument. One should begin by asking how many metanormative theories *deny* the conclusion of the argument—how many theories seriously deny the existence of normative truths? (We'll assume that the range of metanormative theories maps the usual range of metaethical theories.) Perhaps some noncognitivist theories deny the existence of normative truths; this seems like something that A. J. Ayer as a young radical might have embraced. Of course, the availability of the quasi-realist project has muddied these waters considerably, so even the modern noncognitivist might allow the existence of normative truths (or, at least, permit one to make assertions affirming their existence). The constructivist allows the existence of normative facts, as do proponents of any form of naturalistic realism. Even the moral error theorist can allow that there are normative (but non-moral) facts. After all, John Mackie didn't deny the truth of all value claims; just those that essentially involve a claim of objectivity.

Indeed, it's disappointingly apparent by the end of chapter 3 that virtually *nobody* has been sent packing by this argument. Seemingly recognizing this, Enoch ends the chapter with three or four pages trying to score quick points against these alternative views. But in a manner that by this point is becoming rather exasperating, the principal arguments against these views are again postponed to future chapters. The exasperation is more than impatience; rather, I find myself wondering why, if the later arguments against all alternatives to Robust Realism are so persuasive, is the argument from deliberative indispensability not redundant?

In chapter 4 Enoch makes an effort to combine the two conclusions from chapters 2 and 3 into a *prima facie* case for Robust Metaethical Realism. But he admits that they don't combine smoothly or naturally. The general strategy he employs is to argue that if we've been convinced of Robust Metanormative Realism by chapter 3, then what further reason would there be to stop us endorsing Robust Metaethical Realism? One would need to maintain that there's something especially problematic about the idea of non-natural *moral* properties. (The fact that chapter 3 in fact got nowhere near establishing Robust

Metanormative Realism—that we still haven’t seen the arguments excluding alternatives—seems to have been put aside at this point.) The obvious “special feature” of moral norms that might answer Enoch’s question is the fact (if it is one) that moral values and prescriptions are essentially imbued with a kind of categorical authority which renders them problematic. And so Enoch embarks on a discussion of categorical reasons.

He begins by maintaining that his conclusion from chapter 2—that moral judgments cannot be determined by preferences—supports moral categoricity. “[I]f all the reasons you have are hypothetical reasons, then all conflicts due to normative disagreement are of the kind to which IMPARTIALITY (or something like it) applies. But we’ve seen examples of such conflicts (namely, those that are due to a moral disagreement) to which nothing like IMPARTIALITY applies. So some reasons are categorical” (95). However, it seems to me that here Enoch is failing to distinguish between conceptual and substantive theses. An error theorist like Mackie will hold that morality is committed to categorical reasons—this being a conceptual claim—but doesn’t hold that there actually *are* any categorical reasons. Indeed, this may be the basis of his argument for the error theory (though Mackie’s actual views are more complex; see Joyce and Kirchin 2010: xviii-xix).

Enoch may reply that the conclusion of chapter 2 was not the conceptual claim that morality is committed to IMPARTIALITY, but rather the substantive claim that IMPARTIALITY is *true*. (He says this explicitly on page 116.) But nothing in chapter 2 warranted this conclusion; recall that at that point the error theorist was left untouched and unconvinced by the first premise of the argument from the moral implications of metaethical objectivity. Let me put aside the chapter 4 discussion of categorical reasons and jump ahead to the next chapter where Enoch takes on the error theorist squarely.

Here his argument ultimately boils down to a Moorean challenge: If one is more confident of (i) the claim that the infliction of horrible pain on random victims is morally wrong, than one is confident of (ii) any argument that would deny the claim (e.g., an error theoretic argument), then one is entitled to reject the latter argument. “At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself what it is that seems plausible to you” (121).

One problem with this way of arguing is that intuitions are easily misled and tutored. The denial that there is anything morally wrong with inflicting pain on innocents will usually be taken to imply a certain tolerance toward the activity, as implying that it is morally permissible—a conclusion from which people naturally shy away. But of course the error theorist thinks no such thing. The error theorist denies that there is anything morally *permissible* about inflicting harm on innocents with just as much gusto as she denies that there is anything morally *wrong* with doing so. And the error theorist may, in practical terms, be as intolerant of such actions as any Robust Realist. Once these truths are properly digested, the intuitions upon which Enoch’s Moorean argument rests may prove flimsier than he thinks.

Moreover and more importantly, given that Enoch’s opponent here is the error theorist, perhaps we should ask her the question: *Which do you find more plausible: the argument for the error theory or the claim that inflicting pain on innocents is wrong?* Does Enoch really expect to receive the answer “The latter”? Surely not. We are left, then, with the uncomfortable position that those readers who are antecedently hostile toward error theoretic views are entitled to maintain that hostility, while Enoch has offered no argument at which

the error theorist need do anything but shrug. In other words, Enoch doesn't even try to refute the error theoretical view, but (at best) shows that it may be permissible to ignore it if you don't like it. In the broader context of the book, this is very unsatisfying. This is, recall, the much-postponed argument that is supposed to feed back into chapters 2 and 3 in order to bolster them through to the strong conclusions which Enoch hopes to draw. But it now appears that whether one should accept those arguments depends on something highly contingent about one's prior intuitions. Error theorists lack the intuitions in question, so they are free to ignore the arguments for Robust Realism. Thus Enoch has failed to give one of his principal opponents, the error theorist, any reason to abandon his or her position.

Another conspicuous opponent against whom Enoch deploys less-than-devastating arguments is the naturalistic realist. He repeatedly opines that "normative facts and properties ... are just too different from natural ones to be a subset of them" (100), yet takes a long time to provide any support for this claim. Chapter 5 contains a section that is supposed to do away with the naturalist opponent, yet it is ultimately disappointing. Several pages of indirect discussion end with the admission that we're back where we started: "We may not be able to do here much more than just stare at the just-too-different intuition and try to see how plausible it seems to us. ... And to me, it seems very plausible indeed" (108). One wonders whether the naturalistic realist shares Enoch's intuitions on this point. If not—and we can presume not—then another major opponent to Robust Realism emerges unscathed.

One should be suspicious of an argument that relies on the bare intuition that two things are just-too-different from each other when the nature of the difference cannot be articulated. A fairly standard thing one might say to back up the just-too-different intuition is that normative properties bear some special relation to human motivations that natural properties do not or cannot bear. But it becomes clear later in the book (chapter 9) that Enoch doesn't want to spell out the intuition in this manner, for he there denies that even the irreducibly normative non-natural properties which he favors bear any special relation to motivation that natural properties cannot bear. Thus again we face the possibility that even if a reader shares Enoch's intuition (about the normative being just-too-different from the natural), this judgment may be the product of background assumptions that ought to be rejected. In this case, one might have the just-too-different intuition because of (possibly inchoate) presuppositions concerning the relation of the normative to motivational states—presuppositions that Enoch himself will ultimately undermine, thus weakening or obliterating the intuition.

The last four substantive chapters of the book—"Metaphysics," "Epistemology," "Disagreement," and the just-mentioned "Motivation"—are devoted to responding to possible objections to Robust Realism. There is much that is sensible and thought-provoking in these chapters, and on the whole Enoch does a reasonable job of showing that the Robust Realist can see off many *prima facie* challenges. These defensive moves, if successful, will be welcomed by those antecedently attracted to meatethical non-naturalism. Nevertheless, in the broader context of the book, in my opinion, Enoch offers little by way of cogent positive argument for this position—despite the ambitions of the project being to do so. His positive arguments leave too many metaethical alternatives alive, and thus never succeed in homing in on his favored Robust Realism.

Nevertheless, the book contains a great deal that will reward those with a fondness for

metaethics, and Enoch's accessible and honest approach to philosophy is a breath of fresh air to a field prone to dry prose and obscure thinking.

REFERENCES:

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