

Knowing Right from Wrong, by Kieran Setiya (Oxford University Press, 2012)

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[penultimate draft]

Kieran Setiya's previous book, *Reasons Without Rationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2007), argued elegantly for a kind of internal connection between ethical virtues and reasons for action. But even if successful the argument leaves moral skeptics unfazed, for the skeptic can simply doubt that any ethical virtues, so conceived, exist. (By analogy, a moral error theorist may accept that the term "murder" analytically denotes *morally wrongful killing*, but then simply denies that any killings count, strictly speaking, as murders.) *Knowing Right from Wrong* aspires to remedy this limitation with fresh anti-skeptical argumentation. It is a short book with just four substantive chapters aimed at establishing the possibility of moral knowledge.

The first addresses moral disagreement. Setiya accepts that parties can fundamentally disagree on moral matters. According to what he calls "the Equal Weight View," one's confidence in p should fade upon encountering a dissenting epistemic peer if one's prior conditional credence in p is low (where "prior" means prior to thinking things through and knowing what one's peers think about p , and "conditional" means conditional on what one has learned about the circumstances of disagreement). One way of avoiding moral skepticism in the face of peer disagreement would thus be to insist that one's prior conditional credence on moral matters can be high. But this is not Setiya's strategy; he prefers to reject the Equal Weight View altogether. He does so by protesting that the principle unduly nullifies the evidence one may hold in favor of one's moral judgment. If you and I are both trained meteorologists and have consulted the same evidence, and I come to the conclusion that it will definitely rain tomorrow and you (to my surprise) do not, then if as a matter of fact the evidence supports my view, then my credence should remain high. Even though from your perspective it is I who have surprisingly come to an erroneous meteorological opinion, evidence is an objective matter not determined by how it seems to us. The situation, says Setiya, is "enduringly asymmetric" (22).

Given this strategy, Setiya is forced to address the question for the moral case: What kind of evidence do we have for our moral judgments? If there really isn't anything that counts as evidence for moral views, then the anti-skeptical strategy just outlined comes to naught. Hence Setiya embarks on a critical examination of certain theories of moral evidence: intuitionism, coherentism, reflective equilibrium. His positive thesis is that one can have justified moral beliefs on the basis of non-ethical evidence: "What is the evidence by which I am justified in believing that an act is right or wrong, an agent generous or unjust? It is evidence that the act or agent falls under non-ethical concepts, N , where, necessarily, what falls under N is right or wrong, generous or unjust" (49). A person who encounters a sincere moral dissenter need not be epistemically shaken in her moral judgments so long as her beliefs are "in the right [and] not only true but what the evidence supports" (52).

This is where things stand at the end of chapter 1 (which is about a third of the way

through the book). And it should be pretty clear that at this stage the skeptic is more likely to be perplexed than quaking. Setiya premises his anti-skeptical argument on the proposition that when x falls under non-ethical concept N then, necessarily, it falls under ethical concept E . This, however, is exactly what a certain kind of skeptic doubts, globally and across the board. John Mackie can endorse all the solid evidence that you like that a token action has caused harm, has been done from selfish motives, and so forth, and he will nevertheless adamantly reject any claim that the action therefore instantiates any moral concept. Setiya's response to the skeptical challenge that moral disagreement might undermine the epistemic status of one's moral judgments appears to boil down to "No, it's legitimate to maintain confidence in your moral judgments *so long as you're right*"—which looks suspiciously like missing the point. But at least, perhaps, he has shifted the dialectic slightly: from a focus on disagreement to a focus on when one can have non-ethical evidence—dependent on a supervenience thesis—for an ethical judgment.

In chapter 2 Setiya argues that the supervenience thesis can underwrite justification for moral judgments even though the judge in question may be in no position to articulate the thesis. Setiya plumps for a reliabilist externalism: the epistemically justified agent must instantiate "a 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 goes on to address worries raised by Hartry Field and Sharon Street about the implausibility of the existence of such a disposition if the correlation between the facts and our beliefs is mere coincidence. The anti-skeptic, it appears, needs to explain this correlation. (Field raises the worry for the domain of arithmetical beliefs; Street for moral beliefs.)

Suppose I head to the DMV on a given day and find that every one of my departmental colleagues is also there. I would naturally grope for an explanation, but may have to accept the conclusion that it is simply a wild coincidence. Prior to my leaving home, it would be reasonable for me to confidently doubt that such a coincidence will occur, but, once confronted with the unlikely turn of events, there is no call for me to reject the evidence of my own eyes. This is the analogy Setiya uses against Field and Street. While it is reasonable to be dubious of theses that depend on wild coincidences, we need not do so if we have some independent ground for accepting that the coincidence in question has occurred. We have such a ground, Setiya believes, in the case of moral beliefs. Indeed, he thinks that we may simply appeal to the truth of our moral beliefs as evidence that a correlation between beliefs and facts, no matter how *a priori* implausible, has occurred. He accepts the fishy appearance of this: "This reasoning can seem bizarre, or worse. In using my belief to establish my own reliability, don't I illicitly beg the question?" (75). But Setiya thinks he can finesse his way around this accusation of circularity. The passage is worth quoting in full:

My evidence is distinct from the item whose accuracy is being assessed. What I have is evidence that x is N , where necessarily, if x is N then x is E . Since it counts as evidence that x is E , my evidence supports the conditional, if I believe that x is E , my belief is true. In structure, at least, this is no different from any other case of evidentially grounded belief. If I have evidence that it will rain tomorrow, and so conclude that it will, introspective knowledge of the belief that it will rain warrants the further claim that one of my beliefs is true. There is nothing untoward about this. The same thing holds for non-evidential views: if I am entitled to believe that x is E , not on the basis of evidence, I am entitled to believe that, if I believe that x is E , I have a true belief. (82)

Trying to assess whether this is reasonable is likely to leave the reader with a headache, and I'm not going to attempt to pick it apart here (though I'll admit to deep misgivings). Rather, I'll simply advert to one general problem with Setiya's approach: that he seems to presuppose that the moral skeptic doubts just one thing—that x is E —and thus he endeavors to undermine the basis of this doubt by introducing various other premises, such as that if x is N then x is E . The problem is that the moral skeptic will be just as unlikely to grant some of these additional premises, and so remains unperturbed. At times Setiya seems to grow weary of the skeptic's persistent doubt—as philosophers unsympathetic to skepticism often do. Perhaps it's reasonable in other contexts simply to refuse to engage with such a level of doubt, but this, after all, is a book that has set out to defeat the skeptic in a careful and thorough manner. An uncharitable or inaccurate grasp of what moves a moral skeptic is no good here.

In chapter 3 Setiya is concerned to provide an account of how the reliability of our moral judgments could be non-accidental. After all, on a certain understanding of "reliability," a process could be reliable quite by accident, and (it is tempting to suppose) any beliefs produced by such a process will not count as knowledge. He thinks that the only way of satisfying this condition for morality (without appealing to God) is if ethical facts are constitutively bound to us. But Setiya is unwilling to countenance that moral knowledge is impossible: "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 [of moral facts] has to go" (115). (Well, one philosopher's modus ponens is, as they say, another's modus tollens!) The rest of the chapter attempts to develop a sensible constitutive view—one which allows that some of us are reliable in our moral beliefs while also accommodating the possibility of genuine disagreement and error. Indeed, Setiya (quite sensibly) wants to accommodate the possibility of whole communities wandering into moral error. His solution—developed in the fourth and final chapter—is to tie the relation between moral facts and moral beliefs to a conception of human nature.

Setiya's account of human nature is articulated at a very abstract level; his eye is not on the empirical substance but on the broader epistemological game. First he is keen to establish that an account of the nature of a kind can allow of exceptions: while it is part of feline nature to have four legs, a three-legged creature may still be a cat; while (Setiya analogizes) it may be part of human nature to value justice, a whole society of humans may fail to value justice. Setiya toys with two possibilities to connect moral facts with moral beliefs, tentatively favoring the former:

NATURAL EXTERNALISM: Part of what it is to have the concept of ethical virtue is to belong to a life form whose method for identifying traits as virtues is sufficiently reliable.

NATURAL CONSTRUCTIVISM: For a trait to be a virtue is for creatures of one's life form to believe that it is a virtue. (133)

Humans, in others words, are by nature disposed to believe the truth about moral matters. Setiya finishes with a discussion of "faith" and "hope" that human nature might work out in

this way, such that the moral propositions that most people tend to think of as known (“that torture is wrong, that there is reason to care for others, that it is unjust to treat whole populations as slaves” (138)) do indeed turn out to be known.

By the time one comes to this denouement, it seems like one has been on a long journey to a not-terribly-surprising destination to which one might have traveled by a less complicated route. Setiya repeatedly sails perilously close to the wind of begging the question against the skeptic, and I am left far from persuaded that critical scrutiny will see him absolved of committing the fallacy. It is an interesting book, but not an easy one—probably engaging epistemologists more readily than metaethicists. It is densely packed, swiftly moving, and presupposes a fairly sophisticated grasp of the state of the art debate. But I don’t think that it is, in the end, a successful book on its own terms, in that anyone inclined toward moral skepticism is unlikely to be moved from that inclination by Setiya’s arguments.