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Richard Joyce and Simon Kirchin (eds.)

A World without Values: Essays on John Mackie's Moral Error Theory. Dordrecht: Springer, 2010. Pp. xxiv + 238. ISBN: 978-90-481-3338-3.

The suspicion that there is nothing in this world—to put it vaguely—that backs up the authority of our judgments about what is morally right or wrong or impermissible has been around for a long time. Yet, there have been relatively few attempts among moral philosophers to articulate and defend some precise version of that suspicion. Instead, when skepticism of the indicated kind is addressed, it “is wheeled on the stage for the sole purpose of the audience witnessing its crushing defeat” (ix). This is what we are told by the editors of the collection *A World without Values* in the introductory chapter. They also suggest an explanation. The lack of support for moral skepticism is not due to the indefensibility of it, but rather to a familiar type of selection process. People who are disposed to think that we live in “a world without values” are not likely to pursue a career as a moral philosopher, just as atheists seldom choose to spend their lives doing theology.

It might be worth pointing out that the editors here illustrate an argumentative strategy that plays a central role for the type of skepticism the book focuses on. Someone may insist that the fact that it is a minority view among moral philosophers gives us a reason to reject it. After all, we are used to thinking that, if the majority of the experts in an area deem a theory to be implausible, we should be hesitant about it. Not so if the explanation the editors offer is correct. For if the unpopularity of skepticism is simply an artifact of the type of selection process they point to, it in no way undermines its plausibility. In other words, the editors

implicitly defend moral skepticism by offering a “debunking explanation” of a consideration that potentially provides an argument against it, i.e., an explanation that does not rule out the correctness or superiority of the position being challenged. I shall return to this strategy.

Although most moral philosophers tend not to be skeptics, there are of course exceptions. Of these exceptions, John Mackie is one of the most prominent, and it is to Mackie’s version of the skeptical view that we live in a world without values—his “error theory”—that the essays in the collection are devoted.

Mackie’s error theory is usually stated along the following, rough lines: while moral judgments are in the business of stating facts and therefore have truth-values, they are all in fact false. In the introductory chapter, Joyce and Kirchin qualify this account a bit. They stress that it might be better for an error theorist to say that the target judgments are untrue rather than false. Error theorists believe that nothing is morally right or wrong. However, what about judgments like “Right actions tend to promote happiness”? On some views, the non-existence of actions that are right does not make that judgment false, but rather means that it is neither true nor false, which is what underlies their proposal. Of course, non-cognitivists are also often taken to think that moral judgments are neither true nor false, but they differ from error theorists in denying that moral judgments are in the business of stating facts (or that moral utterances are assertions, as the editors prefer to say).

Besides the introductory chapter, the collection consists of thirteen essays. Some of the essays are sympathetic to the error theory, others are critical, and yet others are neutral. However, all contribute to a better understanding of the theory and of the case that can be made for it. Some also shed light on more general meta-ethical questions.

One example is James Dreier’s “Mackie’s Realism: Queer Pigs and the Web of Beliefs.” Contrary to common wisdom, Dreier proposes that Mackie should be characterized as a moral realist rather than as an anti-realist. This surprising conclusion is based on a

specific proposal about how to characterize the difference between realism and anti-realism. The proposal is prompted by the familiar fact that certain developments in meta-ethics (such as the invocation of “minimalism” about truth) have rendered traditional ways of drawing the line obsolete and misleading. According to the account Dreier favors, the difference between realists and anti-realists has to do with their approach to the explanation of certain crucial features of moral discourse, such as the fact that our moral convictions are intimately related with motivation. Anti-realists explain their “practicality” by appealing to the nature of the convictions, whereas realists rather appeal to the “special subject matter of ethics.” I think that Dreier’s suggestion (which is congenial with similar proposals by Blackburn [1993] and others) is on the right track, although I suspect that it will not, when the details are filled in, ultimately favor characterizing Mackie as a realist.

Another essay that also raises more general “meta-meta-ethical” questions is Simon Kirchin’s “A Tension in the Moral Error Theory.” The error theory is based on the idea that moral discourse essentially involves a questionable assumption of some sort (such as, in Mackie’s case, the idea that there are properties that are “objectively prescriptive”). Kirchin’s point is that “everyday moral thought and language” is a much too mushy and heterogeneous entity to justify the idea that it necessarily presupposes a distinct presumption of that sort. In my view, this observation about the mushiness of moral discourse is an important yet often overlooked one. It raises crucial questions about how to characterize the subject matter of meta-ethics and the claims made by meta-ethical theories. For example, might it justify a pluralistic account, according to which a given theory (expressivism, say) may be true of some speakers and some instances of moral discourse while another theory (realism) might be true of others? (See Francén Olinder [2008] for a good discussion of this proposal.)

Richard Joyce’s contribution, “Patterns of Objectivity,” is characterized by the lucid and captivating style of writing that has become his mark. It concerns Mackie’s

“objectification thesis,” i.e., his explanation of why our moral judgments purport to represent facts and why our moral thinking is infested with the error he attributes to it. Joyce wants to figure out which role this thesis has in Mackie’s argumentation. Mackie’s idea is, roughly, that our moral thoughts involve the error of presuming that the actions and so forth that we judge to be wrong or right, good or bad, etc., have certain “objectively prescriptive” properties because we have a general tendency to project our emotions onto the world. How does this help the error theorist? According to Joyce, because it allows her to give a debunking explanation of the fact that so many people “intuit” that the error theory is incorrect, i.e., an explanation that is consistent with the falsity of the intuition. Thus, the potential threat provided by the possession of that intuition can safely be dismissed. In other words, Joyce sees the objectification thesis as an element in an instance of the debunking strategy I mentioned in the beginning.

The collection covers many aspects of the error theory. There are interesting discussions of the role of internalism (Caroline West, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong), of fictionalism (Graham Oddie and Daniel Demetrius), and of practical reason (David Philips). A slightly odd thing, however, is that so little space is devoted to Mackie’s “argument from relativity.” The other argument by which he tries to defend his theory—“the argument from queerness”—is given its due attention (Michael Smith, David Copp). However, although the argument from relativity is mentioned in the introductory chapter and touched upon again in Joyce’s “Patterns of Objectification,” it is mainly ignored. Maybe the editors think that the argument has been sufficiently well covered in other contexts and that there is really nothing more to be said. In my view, that is not the case, and, even if it were, it would have been helpful if the editors had provided some references to that literature. The book’s readership will surely (hopefully!) include many students, and it is a shame if they get the impression

that the argument is less interesting and has a less central role for Mackie than it actually does.

The lack of discussion of the argument from relativity is also unfortunate because the account of it that is given in the introductory chapter is very brief and also slightly confusing. The point of departure of the argument, as the editors stress, is the observation “that there is an enormous amount of variation in moral views, and that moral disagreements often seem unusually intractable” (xvii). They continue as follows:

Mackie argues that the best explanation of these phenomena is that moral judgments “reflect adherence to and participation in different ways of life” (1977, p. 36). This, at least, is a better explanation than the hypothesis that there is a realm of objective moral facts to which some cultures have inferior epistemic access than others. (xvii)

However, a reader might legitimately wonder *why* the alleged superiority of the explanation Mackie hints at is supposed to support his denial of moral facts. After all, it doesn't seem to be incompatible with the existence of such facts, for the simple reason that it doesn't say anything about moral facts at all. It just says that the disagreements can be attributed to the fact that people participate in different ways of life. Joyce seems disposed to deny what I want to say here in that he indicates, in “Patterns of Objectification,” that he thinks that Mackie's explanation does after all invoke the claim that there are no moral facts:

The argument from relativity takes the form of a competition between two hypotheses: the phenomenon of moral disagreement may be explained either by the supposition that some parties have privileged epistemic access to the realm of moral facts (the realist's hypothesis) or by the supposition that there are no moral facts at all (the skeptic's hypothesis). (46)

However, this strikes me as wrong. Although the supposition that there are no moral facts is of course *consistent* with the explanation Mackie offers, it fails to play an explanatory role.

This means that the argumentative link (if there is one) between the superiority of the way of life-explanation and the target position must be more indirect. On a straightforward suggestion, it has exactly the same dialectical role as that which Joyce attributes to Mackie's "objectification thesis," namely a debunking one. The way of life-explanation invokes the theory that our moral beliefs are responses to the ways of life in which we participate. Given its superiority compared to competing explanations, that theory obtains support from the existence of moral disagreement. Now, although the theory in question does not assume that there are no moral facts, it does not assume that they exist either. Thus, it is consistent with the assumption that our moral beliefs are false. In other words, the occurrence of moral disagreement provides support for a theory that seems to allow us to explain why we have the moral beliefs that we have (and why we have moral beliefs at all) in a way that is compatible with their being false. This in turn helps to undermine the justification of the moral beliefs and of the belief that such facts exist. (For further discussion, see Tersman [2006].)

The reconstruction I have just sketched accordingly construes the argument from relativity as yet another instance of the debunking strategy. It therefore illustrates the importance of that strategy for the type of position Mackie advocates. The role of that strategy is worthwhile to note, I think, and to remind our students of. For although the debunking strategy is a powerful one, it has its familiar limitations. What an error theorist can achieve by using it is just to show that the case for the opposite position is deficient. But it doesn't provide them with a positive argument for their theory. Of course, to prove the non-existence of something is often very hard. What we usually have to resort to is the Ockham-inspired thought that we should avoid positing entities when we don't have to. There is nothing wrong with that type of reasoning. However, to be reminded of its role is valuable, as it helps us to

concentrate on the questions that really are at stake when we assess the error theory, namely what it takes in order for us to be said to “have to” posit an entity in some context.

In any case, let me emphasize that I do not view the absence of a discussion of the argument from relativity as a major flaw in the volume, and I think that there are lots of other qualities that make up for it. The collection is a very good read and is highly recommended, both to experts and students.

Folke Tersman

Uppsala University

folke.tersman@filosofi.uu.se

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