

Richard JOYCE. *Essays in Moral Skepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 288 pp.

“Essays on Moral Scepticism” is a collection of twelve essays by Richard Joyce, a leading contemporary proponent of moral scepticism. With one exception, all essays have been published elsewhere already and, in case you are wondering, Richard Joyce is still alive - this is a rather rare case of a ‘Best Of’ of a living philosopher, and it bundles most of his publications from 2005 onward that relate to the topics of his previous monographs, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001) and *The Evolution of Morality* (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2006).

Joyce defends a type of scepticism called the Moral Error Theory (MET). MET is a metaethical view about the nature of morality. It contains two major theses. The first is about the semantics of moral language. Error theorists argue that moral judgements express beliefs which commit us to the existence of objective moral properties. For instance, when we speak of something being morally wrong, we describe that something to be of a particular nature and ascribe certain properties to it; quite as when we say that something is green, we ascribe the property of greenness to that thing. Importantly, error theorists claim that our use of moral language is an attempt to state objective truths and thus to ascribe properties of a very special kind (which is where the analogy to colour-terms breaks down): according to error theorists, when I say that everyone has the right to freedom of speech, then I mean to say that there is an objective fact about the matter of freedom of speech, a fact that exists quite independently of what anyone thinks about it. Note an important difference to the meaning of fictional language. Talk about, say, Kafka’s character Gregor Samsa, who, in the story *The Metamorphosis*, wakes up as a bug one morning, is not truth-apt: we talk about it *as if* it were true, but we do not intend to say that it is *literally* true. Most proponents of MET insist that the commitment to literal objective truth is an irrevocable part of the meaning of moral terms.

The second thesis of the MET is metaphysical. It is about the nature of the moral properties and facts that we are supposedly speaking about when we are using moral language. For instance, claims about the goodness of freedom of speech are true, if they are true, in virtue of moral properties. Unfortunately, error theorists find no room for such properties or facts in the world that meet all the features that our moral talk demands. Hence, the eponymous synthesis of

MET is the following: we talk as if there are objective moral facts (semantic thesis), but there are no objective moral facts (metaphysical thesis), so all our moral judgements are false.

Joyce contributed both to the core claim of the MET, that morality is a myth (because all moral judgements are systematically false) and, seemingly in tension with this view, to the study of moral thought as an evolved capacity. The present volume seems partly intended to resolve this tension, as the title of its introduction suggests: ‘Morality: The Evolution of a Myth.’ Joyce wants to explain why moral thinking is inexorably committed to the existence of moral facts, which, according to him, do not exist, and why the evolution of morality gives us additional reason to doubt our (epistemic) justification to hold moral beliefs.

The thematic connections between the essays in this volume and relations to Joyce’s previous work are evident, though seldom spelt out explicitly. And while each of the volume’s essays makes important points in their own right, the added synthetic benefit is rather limited; many scholars working on the MET will be familiar with most of its content already.

Nonetheless, I would recommend reading the book for two reasons. First, Philosophy-of-Joyce aficionados might appreciate the volume as a handy compendium of his recent work and the evolution of his ideas - especially since seven out of the twelve essays are from edited volumes, which might otherwise be difficult (or expensive) to obtain. Second, and more importantly, Joyce’s introduction is both an exceptionally clear presentation of the MET and a nuanced, insightful, and refreshingly open-minded reflection about its most contested points. Coming from one of the foremost defenders of the view, the introduction alone makes the volume required reading for scholars working on the MET.

I will not describe the contents of all individual chapters here but instead focus briefly on the introduction and then highlight a few points about the single new essay presented in this volume.

The introduction is particularly valuable because erratic conceptions about the error theory abound. Here are some: Error theorists cannot consider something to be a reason for action because they argue that there are no moral facts. Error theorists like Joyce quite clearly deliberate and act nonetheless (he choose to publish this book, right?) so they are inconsistent. Alternatively, some think that Error theorists must not teach moral philosophy because they think that all of morality is a scam. Last but not least, error theorists are perceived as being immoral monsters; after all, they claim that all moral claims are false!

As Joyce makes abundantly clear in the introduction, these worries are unfounded. The MET does not entail that it is (practically) misguided to make moral judgements, nor, necessarily, that we are unjustified in making moral judgements, nor that we should ignore normative claims. The ‘error’ in the error theory is a semantic error - we describe the world to be in a certain way, and, if you will, the world does not conform to our description. However, it might get close - surely there are values grounded in personal and societal relationships. Hence, error theorists might allow that there are myriads of reasons to be kind to each other, to defend freedom of speech, and to asks students to do their homework. However, error theorists maintain that these reasons are not objective in a profound sense; hence, we are misusing language.

Joyce’s frank clarification of the view and his focus on the technical aspects with which it is concerned (as opposed to sensational claims based on misconceptions - imagine the headline “Philosophers find out that Nothing is Ever Wrong!”) also reveal a certain unstableness of the MET: it is affixed to a peculiar, highly contested, and difficult to prove understanding of the commitments incurred by making moral judgements. It is easy to record that someone calls out stealing as ‘morally wrong,’ but hard to ascertain whether he thereby means that ‘stealing is wrong in virtue of a fact that exists independently of what anyone thinks about it,’ and harder still to determine whether *all* users of moral judgements think along these lines. But if error theorists cannot secure this point, then there it seems much more plausible to think that moral judgements can be about less-than-fully objective facts and that we should not restrict (our use of) the term ‘moral’ to only such facts that are objective in this strong sense that is modelled upon the natural sciences.

The sole previously unpublished essay in this volume is “Evolution, Truth-Tracking, and Moral Skepticism”, which relates to the recent metaethical debate about evolutionary debunking arguments. The unpublished manuscript has received considerable attention already - according to Google Scholar, it has been cited at least 15 times, as early as in 2013. For instance, Erik Wielenberg’s book *Robust Ethics*, published in 2014, discusses the article in some detail.

Joyce reacts to critical discussions of the evolutionary debunking argument (EDA), which he defended in his book *The Evolution of Morality*. The conclusion of his original EDA was that *all moral judgements are unjustified* (Joyce 2006: 179-216).

Joyce clarifies how he wants to be understood. He concedes that our moral beliefs might *prima facie* be justified. However, genealogical considerations about our moral beliefs in

general, and evolutionary considerations in particular, indicate that we do not have to assume that our moral beliefs being *true* played a role in us having them. This insight might not amount to an argument; Joyce acknowledges, but it nonetheless creates a challenge for proponents of objectivist views of morality: they have to explain how moral truth played a relevant role in the genealogy of our moral beliefs. Lacking such a story does not mean that all our moral beliefs are false, nor that all our moral beliefs are unjustified. Rather, many of our moral beliefs *might* be true, Joyce concedes, and they *might* be justified, but until proponents of objectivist views of morality have given us a plausible story as to why this is the case the conclusion is that *we do not know whether our moral beliefs are justified* (156).

As Joyce recognises himself, his interpretation of the EDA might “seem like something of a climb-down for the proponent of the EDA” (156) because the conclusion softened from asserting that all moral judgements *are* unjustified to the claim that we simply do *not know yet*.

Joyce thinks that this is not an issue, but, ultimately, it is a climb-down indeed. Debunking a la Joyce is to challenge realists to either show how we can align our moral beliefs with the available evidence (if one is speaking to an evidentialist, who believes that one’s available evidence is relevant for justification) or that we are using reliable methods to form true belief (if one is speaking to a reliabilist, who believes that a belief-formation process is reliable insofar as it produces beliefs that track the truth). Since the massive onslaught of debunking arguments against objectivist views of morality began in 2006, partly due to Joyce’s monograph, many realists have produced precisely those explanations that Joyce demands: they explain why we should expect our moral beliefs to be sensitive to the evidence, or why we should expect them to be formed through reliable processes. Naturally, the *plausibility* of these answers should be scrutinised critically.

However, Joyce does not do that in this essay. He asserts that he is not convinced of any of the existing accounts, and he even writes that “none of these debunkers of debunking has made a serious effort” to meet his challenge (155). That statement seems unfair, and it is certainly outdated: Wielenberg devotes a whole book to answering it (Wielenberg 2014).

The debunking debate evolves quickly, and Joyce’s essay has been discussed years before its publication in the present volume. The weird effect is that he demands a detailed answer to his debunking challenge, and asserts that nobody has made serious attempts to answer it (comparing realists explanations, in a “slightly cruel comparison” (155), to explanations of

evolution proposed by Christian apologists), while there are monographs already published, with explanations that certainly seem sophisticated and which do not seem to be disposable as easy as Joyce makes it look like.

Joyce’s clarification of the challenge was only the first step. At the current state of the debate, we need to get clear about the success-criteria for answering the challenge. Given that Joyce’s clarification of the EDA grants so much to the realist it seems legitimate for realists like Wielenberg to claim that *we know already* that our moral beliefs are justified. If Joyce is not convinced, and, for the record, I am disinclined to be convinced, too, then we need to put criteria on the table that allow for sober discussion of the issue. I cannot find these criteria in Joyce’s present volume and so his presentation of the EDA is a climb-down indeed: its a challenge that realists have explicitly addressed at length, and as long as we don’t know about plausible criteria to judge their answers the moral sceptic is - for the moment, I believe - silenced.

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