

Kieran Setiya, *Knowing Right from Wrong*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. ix + 173pp,  
£25

This review was written in 2013; I cannot remember which journal it was for, and JStor doesn't seem to find it.

The possibility of moral knowledge must be the topic of one of the longest of the footnotes to Plato that, according to Whitehead, make up Western philosophy. According to Plato knowledge of the Good requires a golden nature and a long education of ten years of mathematics followed by five of philosophy. This eventually enables an ascent into an other-worldly acquaintance with the form of the Good. Even so when you return to the Cave in which lesser people dwell, it is not going to be possible for them to be sure whether you have got it, or whether you merely think that you have got it. We might hope that something less rarified, an injection of empiricism, or common sense, or scientific method, will make moral knowledge less mysterious. This tradition sees Aristotle as its founding father. But moral knowledge still proves elusive. In empirical matters the authority of the person who has gone and looked, or that of the scientist who has a vast history of successful prediction and theory behind her, is relatively easy to detect and then to respect. The authority of a self-proclaimed moral expert is more elusive. Scepticism about scientific authority is rare and usually insincere; scepticism about moral expertise is almost orthodox. iPads, rockets and medicines seem to refute relativisms and scepticisms in the scientific domain, but what plays the same role in the ethical world?

Setiya's approach in this careful, lucid, and attractive little book revolves around 'a tension between two things: the need to explain our reliability so that the truth of our beliefs can be no accident, and the need to leave room for communities that are not at all reliable'.

The emphasis on reliability is again a footnote to Plato that is prominent in recent work. Plato argued that knowledge was more than belief that happened to be true. A person making a lucky guess does not know that her claim is true. Knowledge needs in addition 'logos', meaning something like reason, justification, or some kind of sound method, and reliability seems a good yardstick for soundness. Admittedly it has proved very difficult to make this idea precise. I can reliably predict that my premium bond will not win a big prize, but I could scarcely be credited with knowing that it will not. On occasion it may be lucky chance that a generally reliable method gives the right answer, and then we seem unhappy about allowing that its user knew whatever he supposed to be true. Exactly fifty years ago the philosopher Edmund Gettier wrote a famous paper introducing such difficulties, and whole careers have been spent toiling in the salt mines that he opened up.

But even if reliability is a good guardian of knowledge, how are we to judge of reliability? Who shall guard the guardian? I believe that women should have the same educational opportunities as men, and I believe that the cultural and historical forces that have enabled me to slip so naturally into this belief have propelled me reliably towards the truth. A tribesman in Afghanistan will not believe the first, and therefore he will not believe the second either. He will suppose that in saying it I am simply patting myself on the back, or pretending to pull myself up by my own braces. And the second will therefore give me no traction as I try to convince him of the first.

It would be different if we could claim a view from outside: an independent stamp of the reliability of our progress. Some moral philosophers appeal to the bare authority of reason at this point, even comparing knowledge of ethics to knowledge of mathematics or logic, as if the tribesman is caught in some kind of contradiction whereas we are not. Happily, Setiya does not belong to this minority sect. Assuring the tribesman that we belong

to the party of rationality and reason, whereas he does not, is not standing outside the moral fray, but at best making a predictably useless, and irritating, move within it.

However, Setiya does not draw the conclusion that talk of reliability adds nothing useful to the issue. He turns instead to human nature, acknowledging the influence of both Aristotle and Hume. The idea is that human nature has the power to connect our attitudes with moral facts, albeit in a way that leaves room for individuals, and indeed whole communities, to get them wrong. This is more sophisticated than the simple idea that virtues are whatever qualities enable us to flourish together. Setiya rightly recognizes that 'how human beings by nature live is not the measure of how they should', and this stands in the way of some developments of Aristotle and Hume, such as the influential form of naturalism championed by Philippa Foot. His idea is the more modest one that in a proper environment, free from neglect or hunger or abuse, human beings come to manifest their nature or their 'life form', and then they naturally gravitate towards the moral truth. This claim is a generic one. It is not supposed to be universally true, nor a mere statistical generalization. It is comparable to statements in natural history guides and nature programmes: 'finches lay eggs in the Spring', or 'dogs bark'. So the idea is that as a species, in the kinds of circumstance in which we naturally live, we tend to believe what is morally and ethically true.

This might sound unrealistically optimistic. A small acquaintance with history or anthropology suggests that humans have the capacity for the most outlandish beliefs as well as the most wicked crimes. Our life form as a species, or untutored nature, may show us to be reasonably good at coping with our environment, which is just as well, but also seems to leave us vulnerable to the oddest ideas in science, religion, or history, where mistakes do not bring swift retribution. This is indeed the launchpad for a vigorous contemporary form of

moral scepticism, which argues that a capacity for ethical truth would have given no selective advantage to anybody, so that it would be a miracle if it came to predominate as a trait of our species.

One answer that Setiya seems to offer is given by deflating moral truth until it becomes close to a matter of definition that it lies within our grasp. This is the view that he calls natural constructivism: 'for a trait to be a virtue is for creatures of one's life form to believe that it is a virtue'. This is a reductive claim, as Setiya acknowledges, and he devotes some time and skill to showing that it does not fall to G. E. Moore's notorious 'open question argument'. Moore attacked reductions of ethical notions to others, such as ones about the natural history of human beings, on the grounds that it is always an open question whether, for instance, if we naturally believe that hostility to out-groups is a virtue, then it really is so. In spite of Setiya's advocacy I retain a lingering affection for Moore's point, at least in this kind of application: it seems to me that the question of whether hostility to out-groups is a virtue would not be settled firstly by finding that it belongs to our life form to applaud this hostility, or in other words to believe that it is a virtue, and secondly by deploying a definition according to which if we believe it, then it follows that it is true, and hostility to out-groups is indeed a virtue. I do not think we can abolish original sin by definition.

Although Setiya seems to rely on this reductive claim, there are signs that he does not intend it as a simple definition of what it is for a trait to be a virtue. He admits that to believe that we are in this way reliable, and therefore that the conditions for ethical knowledge can be met, is to show a certain faith in human nature. This implies that the worrisome gap between what we naturally believe and what is true is not closed by definition after all. It is closed, if that remains the right word, by an exercise of faith: the optimism that

was partly shared by Aristotle and Hume, but that was mocked by Bernard Williams when he asked us to remember how awful it might be if people followed the sinister injunction 'be a man'.

Setiya warns that if his approach fails there will be no hope for defending moral knowledge, or even justified moral beliefs. If the key does not lie in rationality, nor in a species wide human nature, then there is nowhere else to turn. We would, perhaps be left with a soggy relativism, in which one thing is 'true for' the Afghan tribesman, and another is true for me, and that's the end of it. Yet this seems intolerable: can't I claim to know that pleasure is better than pain, that kindness is a virtue and cruelty is not, or that women deserve the same educational opportunities as men?

A different answer might point out that the claim to know something has a useful role in our social lives. It signals that you can take my word for it, that a case can be considered closed, that there is no likely gain from looking for further confirmation, that no improvement in our current position is likely to upset our verdict. So I could certainly claim to know those unambitious moral claims that I just made, and most readers of this essay would, I hope, concur with me. Nor am I silent when asked how I know them: for a start, I might find words to describe how our lives go if we think otherwise, and paint a grim picture of it. However, being a modest man I might acknowledge a bare possibility of being wrong. There may be an improvement in my position that I hadn't foreseen, that would qualify or upset my simple convictions. But until this bare possibility becomes something more, that seizes my imagination and rocks my certainties, I happily ignore it.

None of this gives me dialectical weaponry with which to topple the Afghan tribesman. I remain, as it were, speaking from within the moral sensibility that my culture and history has created, and we might pessimistically predict that he will remain in his. But

his culture is not hermetically sealed from ours: for a start, it will contain dissident voices, stirrings of modernity, and the burning desire on part of half the population that things should change for them and their daughters. 'Life forms' themselves inhabit a Darwinian jungle, and the best predictor of which ones will survive will surely be how many people find the lives they live sufficiently fulfilling not to wish to change things too much.

The remarks I have just been making come from a philosophical position a little different from Setiya's. Instead of seeking a definition of moral truth or moral knowledge, or anything akin to proof procedures for them, it asks what we do with these concepts, and what they do for us. This shift of emphasis and perspective marks the difference between pragmatism and realism, and for that matter between the later and the earlier Wittgenstein. To the realist the pragmatist is too quickly inclined to ignore the real metaphysical problems, such as the nature of moral truth, or the reliability of our claims to have found it. To the pragmatist the realist is hoping for something unattainable: in this case a foundation outside our ethics for our ethics to stand upon.

The battle is ancient, and can be conducted with chivalry. So in spite of my different perspective I am happy to commend an excellent contribution to a perennially contested area. All philosophers can profit from this book and should admire the meticulous craftsmanship and the modesty and intelligence of its explorations.

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