

Kieran Setiya

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Whatever else we're inclined to think about ethical knowledge, it seems to most of us that we've got a lot of it. Torture is wrong, hitting small children is vicious, Hitler was a very bad man—these things I know. Now, if what I've got here is genuine knowledge, it can't be *mere luck* that my beliefs happen to be true. Knowing requires more. But in *Knowing Right From Wrong*, Kieran Setiya explores three reasons for worrying that our claim to ethical knowledge is indeed threatened by epistemic luck: the first stemming from concerns about ethical disagreement, the second from concerns about the reliability of our belief formation mechanisms, and the third from concerns that it's a mere accident that our methods of forming ethical beliefs are reliable. Setiya's aim over the course of this short but dense work is to show each worry to be surmountable.

Let's begin with the first worry. Intuitionism and coherentism are, these days, two of the most prominent kinds of theories of ethical justification. On the former, ethical beliefs are justified (roughly) insofar as they are supported by one's ethical intuitions, understood as cognitive states, "in which ethical propositions are presented to us as true" (p. 23). On the latter, ethical beliefs are justified, "insofar as they belong to a system of beliefs that is simple, powerful, consistent, and explanatorily deep" (p. 25). The two kinds of theories suffer, Setiya argues, from a similar problem. To see this, consider that it's possible for my ethical beliefs to conflict with those of one of my epistemic peers, even though each of us has beliefs that are supported by our respective intuitions, and even though each of us has beliefs that are coherent. In instances such as these, both of us will be justified in our beliefs, but necessarily one of us will have beliefs that are false. Since our epistemic positions seem symmetrical, I'll lack grounds for believing that I'm the one with the true beliefs. And Setiya worries that if I lack grounds for believing I'm the one with true beliefs, my claim to ethical knowledge is threatened.

Setiya addresses this threat by proposing what he calls a "reductive epistemology," which holds that our ethical beliefs are justified by evidence that is *non-ethical*. Very roughly, the idea is that non-ethical facts will sometimes make true the antecedent of a conditional with an ethically-laden consequent (p. 44). To use examples of Setiya's, we might accept that if one hits a young child hard, then one's act is wrong, or that if a lethally poisonous bug lands on someone's arm, then it's good to hit her in order to squash it. So long as we accept these conditionals, we can say that the non-ethical fact that you hit a young child hard counts as evidence that you acted wrongly, or that the

non-ethical fact that a killer bug had landed on her arm counts as evidence that you did good. This, according to Setiya, allows us to avoid the ethical agnosticism seemingly foisted upon us by disagreement. For if we have two agents with conflicting ethical beliefs, we can now simply deny that their epistemic situations are symmetrical after all. One of the agent's beliefs are, "not only false, but go against the evidence" (p. 52). And the fact that one disagrees with a person whose beliefs go against the evidence doesn't give one any reason for doubting one's own belief.

Let's proceed, now, to the second worry. According to a prominent type of realism, ethical truths are mind-independent. However, if this is so, it's hard to see how we could have ethical knowledge—what, we might wonder, could possibly explain the reliability of our ethical beliefs if ethical facts are the kinds of things the realist imagines them to be (p. 69)? The concern Setiya voices is that we have no explanation, and that this warrants skepticism regarding our beliefs. After all, it seems intuitive to say that, "If I know that a correlation of facts would be inexplicable, I should doubt that the correlation obtains" (p. 68).

In addressing this worry, Setiya notes that the fact that a coincidence is inexplicable warrants skepticism that it obtains only if one lacks some other reason for thinking that it does obtain (p. 73). But in the case of the correlation between ethical beliefs and ethical facts, Setiya thinks we do indeed have such evidence. "That I have true beliefs," he says, "is evidence ... of my reliability" (p. 75). So even though the correlation between my beliefs and the ethical facts seems inexplicable, the truth of my beliefs gives me evidence that the correlation obtains. Now, this sounds like a bald attempt to beg the question—how could one successfully establish that one's beliefs are correlated with the truth by appealing to the truth of one's beliefs? Setiya attempts to stave off this worry by appealing to his reductive epistemology, pointing out that he's not merely assuming the truth of his ethical beliefs, as he has non-ethical evidence of their truth (p. 81). One can appeal to non-ethical evidence in order to confirm the truth of one's ethical beliefs, and in so doing provide confirmation that the correlation between the ethical facts and one's ethical beliefs does indeed obtain. So worries about the inexplicability of this correlation turn out, in the end, not to threaten our claim to ethical knowledge.

The third worry is that even if we form beliefs using methods that reliably track the truth, it might nevertheless be an accident that we do. In order to possess ethical knowledge, it's not sufficient to use a reliable method for forming beliefs, as this would be consistent with our acquiring the method for reasons totally unrelated to its reliability. So there must be an explanatory connection between the reliability of our methods and the fact that we use those methods (p. 98). Setiya thus sets out to make this explanatory connection. In so doing,

he appeals to a brand of neo-Aristotelianism developed by Michael Thompson. Thompson argues that we characterize living things using “natural-historical judgments”—the kinds of generic propositions that we encounter in wildlife field guides, which attempt to put the understanding in contact with a particular life-form. Some examples might include: “the mayfly mates in the spring,” “the horse has four legs,” or “the wildebeest nurses her young.” To make these statements isn’t to say anything about the way all—or even most—mayflies, horses, or wildebeests act or are constituted. After all, some horses have only three legs, and most mayflies expire before mating. Rather, these judgments are about how things are *supposed* to go for these creatures, given their nature. So, Setiya explains, “the fact that the S is by nature F explains why this particular S is F. Its being F is not an accident. I have two arms, two eyes, and the capacity for articulate speech because I am a human being, and human beings have these things” (p. 131). Setiya then suggests that we humans characteristically form our ethical beliefs through particular methods, and that there is a constitutive relationship between the method with which we form our ethical beliefs and possession of ethical concepts. So, for instance, possession of the concept of virtue—the ability to deploy the concept competently—might be linked to exhibiting a form of life whose methods of forming beliefs about virtue reliably track the truth. Crucially, to say this wouldn’t be to imply that every human forms her beliefs in a way that tracks the truth. Rather, it would be to say that when a particular human employs a method that does, it’s no accident (p. 134).

Setiya has written a book that is imaginative and novel, both in the way he develops the skeptical worries at its core, and in the way he addresses them. This isn’t a book for novices, but will undoubtedly be of interest to graduate students and professional philosophers working in moral epistemology. I’d like to conclude, though, with a worry about the positive view with which the book concludes. According to Setiya, ethical knowledge is possible only if humans characteristically form ethical beliefs using methods that track the truth reliably. Now, as we’ve noted, the claim that humans characteristically form ethical beliefs using methods that reliably track the truth is consistent with the existence of many humans who form ethical beliefs in ways that don’t track the truth. Such individuals are simply defective specimens, in the way that a three-legged horse is. So when I notice the massive ethical disagreement that seems to be a permanent staple of the human condition, it needn’t suggest to me that humans aren’t, after all, characteristically reliable when it comes to ethical truth. It might just be that many of us are defective. Indeed, Setiya concludes the book by professing his faith that humans are characteristically reliable, despite the widespread disagreement over ethical issues (pp. 142–158).

However, if *I* have really got ethical knowledge, it must be that *I* am one of the lucky ones whose methods really do track ethical truth reliably—and what reason have I got for thinking that I am? Of course, Setiya will insist that I have evidence that my beliefs are true. Be that as it may, I might look around the world and notice that others are in a position that's symmetrical with my own—that is, they'll have ethical beliefs, formed through methods that seem proper to them, which appear to them to be supported by the evidence. Obviously whoever's belief forming mechanisms are functioning as they ought will likely have ethical beliefs supported by the evidence. But what reason have I got for thinking I'm the one who's the good specimen? It seems to me that Setiya leaves us in a place where ethical disagreement will once again cause us to experience a crippling sort of epistemological vertigo. It's a testament to how vividly Setiya renders the skeptical worry about disagreement that I'm left, at the end of the book, still in its grip.

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