

Setiya, Kieran. *Knowing Right from Wrong*.

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Kieran Setiya's *Knowing Right from Wrong* is a clear and insightful examination of several of the most pressing problems in moral epistemology. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in questions about the rational response to ethical disagreement, the reliability of our ethical beliefs, or the possibility of ethical knowledge.

As I see it, the book has three main theses. I here state the theses only roughly, inventing names for the latter two.

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| (Reductive Epistemology) | To have evidence for some ethical proposition p is to have evidence for some non-ethical proposition q such that necessarily if q then p . |
| (No Problem) | Our ethical beliefs may still be justified even if their being true would be an inexplicable coincidence. |
| (Knowledge-by-Constitution) | If we do have ethical knowledge, there is a 'constitutive connection' between our ethical beliefs and the ethical truth. |

The first half of the present essay reviews Setiya's main arguments for these theses. The second half develops some thoughts of my own. First, I raise a particular issue concerning Setiya's argument for No Problem. Second, I argue that when it comes to ethical disagreement, Reductive Epistemology is even

more explanatorily powerful than what Setiya lets on. Third, I argue that Reductive Epistemology nevertheless faces a serious objection.

Part One: the Three Main Theses

Reductive Epistemology

At first glance, chapter one of *Knowing Right from Wrong* appears to address the question of how to rationally respond to ethical disagreement. The real purpose of chapter one, however, is to use various *assumptions* about ethical disagreement to argue for a certain moral epistemology—namely, Reductive Epistemology—over two competitors.

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| (Coherence Theory) | Our ethical beliefs are justified insofar as they belong to a system of beliefs that is simple, powerful, consistent, and explanatorily deep. |
| (The Empirical Model) | Our ethical beliefs are justified by evidence, and at bottom that evidence consists in our ethical intuitions—i.e., <i>seemings</i> that p , where p is some ethical proposition. |

Setiya argues that Coherence Theory—or rather, knowledge of the truth of Coherence Theory—implies an ‘unacceptable ethical egoism’ (35 – 37). Suppose that I have not yet formed any opinions on ethical matters, but I know that the Coherence Theory is true. Given a principle Setiya calls ‘Reflection’ (33), this implies that I am *now* justified in believing the following conditional: if I form any coherent set of ethical beliefs, my ethical beliefs will be true and those of any dissenting interlocutor will be false. That, Setiya contends, is unacceptable epistemic egoism. Setiya argues that his own view, Reductive Epistemology, has no such implication. Give Reflection, what we can derive from knowledge of Reductive Epistemology is that I am now justified in believing the following conditional: if I form ethical beliefs that are in accordance with the evidence, then my beliefs will be true and those of an interlocutor who does not form beliefs in accordance with the evidence will be false. That, Setiya contends, is an acceptable deference to the evidence.

Setiya argues that The Empirical Model faces a dilemma, one horn of which is the objection faced by the Coherence Theory (29 – 35). Suppose we meet someone who has all the same non-ethical information as we do—henceforth, a ‘non-ethical peer’—but who has ethical intuitions radically different from our own. Setiya contends that, if the Empirical Model is true, then either the intuitions of the non-ethical peer count as much, evidentially speaking, as our own intuitions, or they do not. If they do not, then the Empirical Model, like the Coherence Theory, implies an unacceptable epistemic egoism (32 –

35). If they do, then the discovery of radical ethical disagreement with a non-ethical peer ought to lead us to ethical agnosticism (29 – 32). This, Setiya assumes, is the wrong result: those who think that, e.g., we have no ethical obligations other than to act selfishly ought to be condemned, not given deference (20). Setiya argues that his own view, Reductive Epistemology, gives the right result. According to Reductive Epistemology, ethical intuitions play no special evidential role. Rather, the non-ethical evidence shared by non-ethical peers will often, according to Reductive Epistemology, support one of their ethical beliefs over the other. Drawing on recent work by Tom Kelly (“Peer Disagreement and Higher-order Evidence” in *Disagreement*, R. Feldman and T. Warfield, eds. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010]: 111 – 74), Setiya argues that in such a case both parties ought to believe what the non-ethical evidence supports, even after learning of their disagreement (52). This means that one party ought to stick to their guns—namely, the party that has their beliefs in line with the common non-ethical evidence. This, Setiya assumes, is the right result.

No Problem

Chapter two considers a particular kind of argument for ethical skepticism. In its final formulation, this argument rests on a principle Setiya calls

(Coincidence Qualified) If I know that a correlation of facts would be inexplicable, and I am not otherwise justified in accepting it, I should doubt that the correlation obtains (73).

The question, then, is whether we are justified in believing that there is a correlation between our ethical beliefs and the ethical truth. Setiya argues that given Reductive Epistemology, we are so justified. According to Reductive Epistemology, the question of whether we are justified in believing that such a correlation obtains—that is, justified in believing that our ethical beliefs are true—comes down to the question of whether we have evidence for the non-ethical propositions that necessarily imply the ethical propositions we believe. Moreover, it seems that we *do* have such evidence: we have, for example, evidence that solitary confinement causes psychological pain, and it is plausible that necessarily if solitary confinement causes psychological pain, then solitary confinement is *pro tanto* wrong.

Is the kind of reasoning Setiya is envisioning viciously circular? He argues that it is not. To make his case, Setiya distinguishes the kind of reasoning he is envisioning from a nearby kind of reasoning, one that does appear to be viciously circular (81 – 82).

Reasoning One

Let p be some non-ethical proposition.

1. I have a perceptual appearance that p (by introspection).
2. p (by a perceptual appearance that p).
3. Thus, my perceptual appearance that p is veridical.

Setiya contends that Reasoning One is viciously circular because the piece of evidence used in support of premise (2)—the perceptual appearance that p —is the very item whose ‘accuracy is being assessed’ (82). By contrast, the kind of reasoning that Setiya is envisioning has the following structure.

Reasoning Two

Let p be some ethical proposition and let E be evidence for some non-ethical proposition q such that necessarily if q then p .

- 1*. I believe that p (by introspection).
- 2*. p (by E).
- 3*. Thus, my belief that p is veridical.

In Reasoning Two, the item whose accuracy is being assessed—the belief that p —nowhere shows up as piece of evidence. Thus, Setiya claims, Reasoning Two is not viciously circular.

Knowledge-by-Constitution

In chapter three, Setiya considers what he takes to be a more serious skeptical challenge. This challenge can be seen as something of a refinement of the argument from coincidence. Where the latter rests on Coincidence Qualified, this argument rests on a principle Setiya calls

- (K) When S knows that p , she knows it by a reliable method, and it is no accident that her method is reliable.

Setiya contends that unless we accept the view that there is a ‘constitutive connection’ between our ethical beliefs and the ethical truth, then the methods via which we form our ethical beliefs are at best accidentally reliable. Together with (K), this entails

(Knowledge-by-Constitution) If we do have ethical knowledge, then there is a ‘constitutive connection’ between our ethical beliefs and the ethical truth.

The consequent of Knowledge-by-Constitution, which we’ll call ‘Constitution’, might suggest the view that our ethical beliefs constitute the ethical truth. Setiya calls this particular view ‘constructivism’, but it might be more descriptively called ‘belief-to-truth constitution’. As Setiya notes, belief-to-truth constitution is only one version of Constitution. The constitutive relationship might go the other way: our ethical beliefs—more precisely, the *content* of our ethical beliefs—might be constituted by the ethical truth. Call this ‘truth-to-belief constitution’. Setiya’s representative version of truth-to-belief constitution is a view he calls ‘externalism’. Consider the concept BEING RIGHT. As I understand it, externalism is the thesis that our concept BEING RIGHT has the property P as its content only if (a particular subset of) our methods for applying the concept BEING RIGHT reliably pick out things that have the property P. This means that, according to externalism, the contents of our ethical beliefs are in part determined by which things have the properties picked out by our ethical concepts—if those things did not have those properties, then our ethical concepts would not pick them out. This makes externalism a version of truth-to-belief constitution. Setiya suggests that the views of both Richard Boyd (“How to be a Moral Realist” in *Essays on Moral Realism*, G. Sayre-McCord, ed. [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988]: 181 – 228) and Frank Jackson (*From Metaphysics to Ethics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998]) are both versions of truth-to-belief constitution (119 – 120). It is not clear whether Setiya takes them to be versions of externalism specifically.

Because Constitution is officially neutral with respect to which direction the constitution relation goes, the thesis is quite a bit weaker than one might have initially thought. In fact, as Setiya notes, the philosophical literate contains a growing consensus around Constitution in one form or the other (120). However, Setiya uses this thesis in an argument for a far more controversial thesis. The most plausible version of Constitution, Setiya argues, is a version according to which the ethical truth, for us, has a constitutive connection to those beliefs that humans are by their nature disposed to have. Given Knowledge-by-Constitution, this implies a highly controversial view we might call

(Knowledge-by-Nature) If we do have ethical knowledge, human nature is such that humans are disposed to believe the ethical truth.

Setiya dedicates the final pages of *Knowing Right from Wrong* to speculations about the plausibility of the consequent of Knowledge-by-Nature, arguing that current research does not settle the matter one way or the other.

Part Two: Further Thoughts

Vicious Circularity?

As indicated above, Setiya contends that, given Reductive Epistemology, engaging in the following kind of reasoning is enough to justify one in believing that one's belief that p is true.

Reasoning Two

Let p be some ethical proposition and let E be evidence for some non-ethical proposition q such that necessarily if q then p .

- 1*. I believe that p (by introspection).
- 2*. p (by E).
- 3*. Thus, my belief that p is veridical.

Setiya contends that this kind of reasoning is not viciously circular because, unlike in Reasoning One, the item whose accuracy is being assessed is nowhere used as evidence in support of the argument's premises.

Still, we can imagine the skeptic pushing back. Given Reductive Epistemology, to be justified in believing that E is evidence for p , we must be justified in believing q necessarily implies p . But for any q , the proposition that *necessarily if q then p* is an ethical proposition, since p is itself an ethical proposition. Hence, we are justified in believing that E is evidence for p only if we are justified in believing some ethical proposition. But the question at hand is whether *any* of our ethical beliefs are justified, and so, one might argue, we cannot simply assume that some of them are.

The issues here are delicate, but the first thing to note is that Reasoning Two does not rest on the *premise* that E is evidence for p . What does rest on that premise is a certain higher-order argument *about* Reasoning Two. The conclusion of the higher-order argument is that engaging in Reasoning Two is a way to arrive at a justified belief that one's belief that p is true. Reasoning Two is thus what epistemologists call 'epistemically circular', as opposed to 'premise circular'. It is controversial whether and under what conditions epistemically circular arguments are viciously circular (William Alston, "Epistemic Circularity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 [1986]: 1 – 30). Presumably Setiya thinks that the epistemic circularity here is non-vicious, but unfortunately he does not say why.

Explanatory Power

It seems to me that Reductive Epistemology has even more explanatory power than what Setiya lets on. When it comes to ethical disagreement, in particular, Setiya only tells half the story. The half he tells concerns the ability of Reductive Epistemology to explain why we ought not to become agnostic in the face of radical ethical disagreement. The half Setiya doesn't tell concerns the ability of Reductive Epistemology to explain why we ought *to* become agnostic in many cases of less radical ethical disagreement. How does Reductive Epistemology allow for this? Consider the following analogies.

Physics One. Jane is a physics student viewing a particular kind of streak in a cloud chamber. Given Jane's background information, the streak is, in fact, evidence for a proton. Accordingly, Jane believes that a proton has just passed through the cloud chamber. But also viewing that cloud chamber at the moment are two people that have just wandered in off the street: Angelina, who claims that the streak is indeed evidence for a proton, and Brad, who says that it is not.

Physics Two. John is a physics student viewing a particular kind of streak in a cloud chamber. Given John's background information, the streak is, in fact, evidence for a proton. Accordingly, John believes that a proton has just passed through the cloud chamber. But also viewing that cloud chamber at the moment are two physics professors: Prof. Avnur, who claims that the streak is indeed evidence for a proton, and Prof. Bernstein, who says that it is not.

What ought Jane to believe in Physics One? If Jane has no reason to think that Angelina is any more reliable in physics than Brad, or vice versa, then Jane is justified in maintaining her belief that a proton passed through the chamber—the conflicting advice of these two non-experts should not dissuade her from her initial belief that there a proton has just passed through the cloud chamber. This contrasts sharply with John's situation in Physics Two. If John has no reason to think that one of his professors is any more reliable than the other, it seems the most rational thing for him to do is to suspend judgment about whether there was a proton. Contrasting these cases suggests that conflicting opinions about the evidential bearing of *e* on *h* can undermine *e*'s status as a (sufficient) reason to believe *h*, provided that those conflicting opinions come from experts—or rather, those whom the subject has good reason to believe are experts.

This insight allows us to show that Reductive Epistemology makes room for the thesis stated above—namely, that in many cases of less radical ethical disagreement, we ought to become agnostic

about the ethical issue in question. As we saw above, Reductive Epistemology implies that, in cases of *radical* ethical disagreement between non-ethical peers, the party that has her beliefs in line with the common non-ethical evidence—hereafter ‘CNE’—ought to stick to her guns. But now consider a case of *local* ethical disagreement: A and B agree on all ethical matters save one where A believes p and B believes $\sim p$. Suppose that CNE both supports the ethical propositions on which A and B agree and supports p . When learning of their disagreement, should A persist in her belief that p ? Given Reductive Epistemology, this case is akin to Physics Two. A has evidence that most of what she and B believe on ethical matters is true. She thus has evidence that both she and B are something like ethical experts. The same goes for B: he too has evidence that they are both ethical experts. But now A and B have conflicting opinions on whether CNE is evidence for p . As in the case of Physics Two, these conflicting expert opinions serve as defeaters of CNE’s status as a (sufficient) reason to believe p . Hence, both parties ought to become agnostic with respect to p .

In short, while Reductive Epistemology predicts that *global* ethical disagreement is no grounds for ethical agnosticism, it also predicts that *local* ethical disagreement often is grounds for ethical agnosticism. Intuitively, there is something quite compelling about this differential view: those who disagree with us on *all* or even *most* ethical matters are to be dismissed as moral monsters, while those who merely disagree with us here and there probably ought to shake our confidence on the issues where we disagree. That Reductive Epistemology offers an explanation of this epistemic difference between global and local disagreement is surely a big point in its favor.

Oddness

As we’ve seen, Reductive Epistemology is a view with considerable explanatory power. Nevertheless, the view, as least insofar as Setiya develops it, is subject to a significant objection. The objection concerns what we might call the ‘oddness’ of the view. The oddness is this: nowhere else do necessity relations seem to constitute evidence relations in the way that, according to Reductive Epistemology, they do in ethics. For example, the proposition that this is a glass of water necessarily implies the proposition that this is a glass of H₂O. But evidence for the proposition that this is a glass of water is not—all by itself, anyway—evidence for the proposition that this is a glass of H₂O. If it were, then we would have had loads of evidence that our glasses contained H₂O prior to conducting any kinds of serious investigations into the chemical structure of water. And yet this is precisely how evidence works, according to Reductive Epistemology, in the case of ethics. Why should this be? Why, that is, should evidence work this way in ethics but not this way in, say, chemistry? Setiya does not say.

Where does this unexplained oddness leave us with respect to Setiya’s argument for Reductive Epistemology? One way to see things is this: Setiya has given us an argument to the effect that if

evidence *doesn't work this way in ethics*, then we should become agnostic in the face of radical ethical disagreement. Assume that conditional is true. If we don't have any explanation of why evidence would work this way in ethics, when it doesn't work this way elsewhere, it may very well be rational to turn Setiya's argument on its head: since evidence in ethics (probably) doesn't work this way, we (probably) ought to become agnostic in the face of ethical disagreement.

I don't take this to be a devastating objection to Reductive Epistemology. To the contrary, this might simply mean that Reductive Epistemology will open up an exciting new area of research in moral epistemology. Insofar as we are convinced that we really should remain steadfast in the face of radical ethical disagreement and insofar as we have reason to believe that Setiya's arguments are sound, we have reason to figure out why evidence in ethics would work the way Reductive Epistemology says it does. This is but one of many reasons why *Knowing Right from Wrong* is an incredibly exciting book, worthy of consideration by anyone working on moral epistemology.

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