

Ritchie, Angus: *From Morality to Metaphysics: The Theistic Implications of Our Ethical Commitments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012. 208 Seiten. [ISBN 978-0-19-965251-8]

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In a secular age, God seems to recommend himself as a source of morality primarily by the shortcomings of his rivals: the secularist's vices are God's virtues. It is therefore a common – and legitimate – strategy among those wishing to defend a broadly theistic outlook on ethics to point to certain problems secularist metaethical theories are, allegedly or actually, unable to solve. This strategy is adopted, too, by Oxford University's Research Associate in Philosophy and Anglican priest Angus Ritchie in his essay "From Morality to Metaphysics". In the following review of this book, I will first set out Ritchie's problem, named "the explanatory gap", and try to explain under what conditions, and for which theories, it is a problem (I). Then, following the argument of the book, I will consider a range of secular attempts to bridge the gap (II). Having seen how all of them fail, what remains is to look at the theistic alternative. That this will be a short look (III) reflects both the largely negative argument and the fact that of the 190 or so pages of the book, only 17 are devoted to the solution favoured by the author.

I

The "explanatory gap" emerges, Ritchie claims, between the independent moral order defended by objectivist theories and our alleged capacity to recognise it. Why is it that we developed such a capacity for truth-tracking moral reasoning? This question is not to be confused with two different ones, as the author takes pains to show. The first one asks why we are justified in thinking our practical reason is truth-tracking in the first place: "What is the justification for our faith in their reliability [sc. the reliability of our capacities for practical reasoning]?" (43) The second asks for "the historical explanation of their development" (ibid.), meaning an anthropological and sociological account of how human beings came to develop, and pass on to the next generation, certain moral practices. By contrast, the problem Ritchie is concerned with is one of explanation: assuming our practical reason to be in the business of finding the truth about practical questions, "how do human beings, developing in a physical universe which is not itself shaped by any purposive force, come to have the capacity to apprehend objective moral norms?" (4)

But why accept there is such a gap to be bridged in the first place? Why think, that is, that we have a moral faculty tracking some objective moral order? In chapter 1, Ritchie rehearses some well-known arguments concerning the question “Why take morality to be objective?” Discussing Mackie’s arguments from queerness, he follows the strategy of looking for companions in innocence. If practical norms are “queer” in that they are at once objective and normative, then so are norms of theoretical reasoning such as principles of Inference to the Best Explanation. But then these principles are (borrowing a phrase from David Enoch) “deliberatively indispensable”: a global scepticism about them comes necessarily at the price of refraining from any serious attempt to understand the world around us. The epistemological worries Mackie raises are met by the author by showing that in both science and ethics we have to rely on the process of reflective equilibrium, i.e. on the dialectic between intuitively compelling singular judgements and their systematisation into general rules. Finally, the argument from relativity is rejected by an appeal to the fact that in most cases moral disagreement arises not from fundamentally different moral principles and values but from different applications of the same general outlook combined with certain empirical claims.

The author then turns to an outline of “the positive case for objectivism”. The positive arguments Ritchie puts forward draw mainly on the *moral* costs of non-realist metaethics – an interesting though methodologically questionable pattern of argument, for it is hard to see how a theory could be false for failing to be beneficial. Error theory (and the like) deprives us of the possibility of any serious attempt at reaching a moral truth and, thus, of making good sense of our deliberative practices. What is more, the author urges that metaethical scepticism leads directly to changes in our first-order moral commitments, and not for the better. So, he concludes, there is good reason to think meta-ethical objectivism true.

Now, what about the “explanatory gap” mentioned above? Why would the existence of a truth-tracking moral faculty be more of a problem for the moral objectivist than the existence of truth-tracking, say, perceptual capacities for the objectivist about perception? And why is it something that requires explanation in the first place? In a lucid discussion of objections made by Ronald Dworkin in his paper “Objectivity and Truth: You’d better believe it” (1996), Ritchie admits that even in the absence of an explanation of the kind that he envisages our moral objectivism might still be justified, since none of the arguments in favour of objectivism given in chapter 1 depends on the possibility of such an explanation in any way. But, the author claims, in

this case “we would be forced to postulate a large-scale and quite inexplicable correlation between our faculties and the moral order” (46), a sort of cosmic accident: we would have developed a capacity to detect the moral truth *randomly*. And this is what seems implausible. Ritchie therefore insists on an explanation of those capacities that is internally connected to their being truth-tracking. In the case of our perceptual or theoretical capacities, such an explanation is at hand: the quasi-teleological mechanism of natural selection. Here, it is precisely their truth-tracking nature that helps explain how these faculties came about. For it is obvious how the ability to form correct beliefs about the environment by means of a working perceptual system would help detect enemies, sources of food and potential partners, thus enhancing the individual’s (and its group’s) chances of survival and procreation. Whether the same holds for the principles of theoretical reasoning such as Inference to the Best Explanation or for mathematical reasoning, as the author claims, is much less obvious – in fact, it is hard to see how mathematical skills could have been selected in the evolutionary process. Anyway, it is assumed that the benefit of these capacities, and hence the evolutionary explanation of their development, lies precisely in their being truth-tracking.

II

The “moral Darwinian” follows an analogous line with respect to our *moral* capacities. He claims that the evolutionary process is intrinsically, though indirectly, linked to the objective truth of these beliefs: in his view, our moral beliefs are selected not for the fact of their truth but for their conduciveness to “collective flourishing”. But since objective rightness is aimed at collective flourishing, too, there is a non-coincidental connection between objective rightness and usefulness for the community. However, this account is dismissed by Ritchie with respect mainly to the ambiguity of “flourishing.” If we use the term in a morally neutral term, as the biologist will do, flourishing will amount to no more than “survival, replication, and pleasure” (56). If other valuations we make, such as admiring the beauty of a sunset, cannot be traced back to one of these in a more indirect way, they are “essentially aimless by-products of the evolutionary process” (*ibid.*), so the moral Darwinian again has no explanation why they should be connected to the moral truth in any way. If, on the other hand, an explanation can be given in terms of survival and replication alone, he falls foul of the second of the author’s objections, *viz.* the moral one: “a value system based solely on survival, replication, and pleasure yields results that are quite immoral” (*ibid.*); in many cases, doing

what is best in terms of evolutionary success seems to be in conflict with our considered moral judgements. So, the author concludes, the moral Darwinian is unable to provide an explanation why those moral judgements in tension with individual or collective flourishing (evolutionarily understood) should be *true*. The Darwinian's resources are just too limited to explain the accuracy and determination which (in many cases) our concern for the weak and the vulnerable displays.

Two other options remain open within a broader evolutionary framework, both of which seek to ground our capacities for practical reasoning in our theoretical reasoning. The first one claims that all moral statements are analytically true or false, so their negations would be logically contradictory (a view held by Richard Swinburne). This position is ruled out by the consideration that in this case, "all that would be required in order to work out how humans ought to behave would be logical analysis" (61), while in fact substantial moral facts cannot be arrived at in this way. The second way would be to defend a "hybrid theory" of ethics, with "one or two synthetic a priori principles" (61) in combination with our ordinary theoretical reason. The trouble with this view, illustrated by Roger Crisp's brand of hedonism, is, however, that it needs to take certain of our normative intuitions, in this case, those in favour of pleasure, more serious than others, say, those concerning distributive justice. Again, what is missing is an account of how those moral attitudes and judgements not directly supporting survival and replication came about. Nor does it help to claim that practical reasoning is nothing but an application of theoretical reasoning. In fact, practical reasoning entails very different ways of thinking relying as it is not only on applying general principles to individual cases, but on a considered and reflected sensibility to the particularities of each situation, involving not only cognitive states but motivational and affective ones as well. The author therefore comes to the conclusion that none of the sketched ways to analyse the development of our moral capacities, assuming them to be truth-tracking, in terms of enhancing our prospects for survival and replication ultimately succeeds, be it direct or more indirect. So, the question remains: What is the explanation for the alleged fact that our moral capacities are truth-tracking?

With this question in mind, Ritchie goes on to consider (in part II) a wide variety of "secular" meta-ethical positions, ranging from quasi-realism to David Wiggins' "sensible subjectivism". One might object that none of these theories is primarily in the business of answering the author's question, rather than figuring out what kind of objectivism (if any) we should favour. Anyway,

it is a legitimate enterprise to ask which of these secular accounts of morality has sufficient resources to do justice to both the “pull of objectivism” on the one hand and the need for an account of the development of morality on the other. In short, the answer is: none of them has.

The first group of theories fails for the fact that they cannot vindicate some of our most basic moral convictions, argued for in chapter 1. The main argument against moral quasi-realism put forward by the author presses the observation that human beings tend to hold their ethical views with a certain provisionality. If moral truth is to be “constructed” out of our cares, concerns, and passions, whilst avoiding the counterintuitive consequences of pure subjectivism, how are we to conceive of apparent moral progress, as it is evident in the case of growing concern for hitherto excluded groups such as women or homosexuals? Here, it cannot be current concerns from which quasi-truth is to be discovered, for it is precisely *their* bias that has to be overcome. So quasi-realism ultimately fails in its attempt to have the cake and eat it. Likewise, Korsgaardian constructivism (or “procedural realism”) seems unfit to capture our objectivist intuitions. Famously, Korsgaard’s argument depends on the idea that “the principle or law by which you determine your actions is one that you regard as being expressive of *yourself*.” (Korsgaard 1996: 100) Against this kind of view, the author urges the possibility of immoral self-identity, a point made by G. A. Cohen (1996: 183–4). Fundamentally, Korsgaard is getting it the wrong way round: it is not our identity (as a friend, citizen, practical agent) that is primarily expressed in our acts of valuing, but these acts, aimed as they are at getting it right, constitute our practical identity.

By contrast, Thomas Scanlon, who in his earlier work endorses a position much like Korsgaard’s, has since turned to a “more wholeheartedly objectivist position”, as Ritchie views it. Scanlon now holds a view he calls “reasons fundamentalism”, acknowledging a space of reasons independent of rational agents. However, “the explanatory gap re-opens” (107) in that the question arises again what explanation can be given for our practical cognitive capacity to be truth-tracking. Unfortunately, it turns out that Scanlon does not have much to say about this, claiming the relevant problems left after ruling out a direct causal influence of ethical facts on our considered judgements are those concerning their justification. But, as Ritchie points out, it is a legitimate challenge to ask *why* it is we are capable of them. With this problem, Scanlon leaves us alone.

More or less the same applies to the other secular objectivist approaches to morality under consideration, viz. Philippa Foot’s “Natural Goodness”,

John McDowell's "anti-anti-realism", and David Wiggins' "sensible subjectivism." Foot's attempt at grounding morality in "human flourishing" without confounding it with purely biological categories such as survival and reproduction looks promising, the idea being that there is a kind of pre-moral, natural normativity contained in sentences such as "Men have thirty-two teeth" from which moral goodness is to be derived. Thus, it would be part of what it means to be a good human being to have certain virtues, e. g. honesty. It is, however, the mark of the honest man that he does *not* deliberate every time faced with a choice over whether being honest would contribute to his flourishing or not. "So, if traits are to be valued solely in terms of their contribution to such flourishing, it is hard to see why we should prefer traits which lead us to keep our promises and refrain from sexual assault *at all times* over a more fine-grained set of character traits" (119). Quite generally, the verdict over Foot's account is that "it cannot avoid the inadequacies we identified in Darwinian accounts of ethics" (122): either "good" is defined naturalistically, making it depend on what contributes to the individual's or its group's survival and replication, or it is defined in a straightforwardly normative way, in which case no naturalistic story can be told about how we came to have the aforementioned intuitions.

That such a story is something that legitimately can be asked for is denied by McDowell, arguing that once a justification of our reliance on moral capacities and a historical explanation of their development have been given, a further demand for explanation would have to be a "sideways-on comparison" (meaning the attempt to talk about our practices from a standpoint external to those practices themselves). But, Ritchie explains, "the request for explanation is not coming from 'sideways on', but from within the community's existing language" (142). What is more, the demand for an explanation can be and actually is met in the case of theoretical reasoning. So, the demand is legitimate and cannot be escaped in the way McDowell proposes. The conclusion of the discussion of all these "secular" thinkers (secular in that they reject any purposive account of the universe) is that none of them is able to avoid both "the Scylla of insufficient objectivity" and "the Charybdis of the explanatory gap" (155).

So, if we want to stick to an objectivist metaethics without turning our back on any attempt to bridge the "explanatory gap", we will need to reconsider theories that make use of one or the other form of teleological explanation. Axiarchism (advocated by John Leslie and Hugh Rice) is the claim that value is itself, and not only *via* a benevolent deity, causally efficient, so the fact

of something's being good can figure in an explanation of its occurrence. The disadvantage pointed out by the author is its counter-intuitive nature (181–6). The fact that it entails no logical contradiction is in itself hardly evidence enough to think it true. Rather, axiarchism seems to cut off explanation at a point where much more might be said, particularly about the question why human beings developed the practical cognitive capacities they have.

III

This is what Ritchie attempts in his defence of classical theism. How does God bridge the gap between objective moral facts and our capacity to recognise them? Rather less surprisingly, the author invokes theism as an “agent explanation”: conceived of as an intentional agent, God brings about what he knows to be good and therefore wills. The obvious objections are addressed by the author in turn. The problem of the relation between God and goodness can be solved in two ways: moral truths might be conceived of as necessary and ontologically distinct from God; or they have to be grounded in God's loving nature (Robert Adams' solution). Ritchie claims that either of these solutions is compatible with classical theism. The possibility of an ‘evil god’ who, knowing what is good, brings about the opposite, is dismissed by the consideration that there is an explanatory asymmetry between theism and the ‘evil god hypothesis’: while in the case of a benevolent deity we would know what to expect (*viz.* that we be able to detect the moral truth), this is much less clear under the assumption of an ‘evil god’ (would he make us believe evil things to be good or let us know the moral truth so that we can sin knowingly?). In sum, the author comes to the conclusion that classical theism can be defended against these objections and is, therefore, the candidate best equipped to bridge the “explanatory gap.”

Whilst the argument of the book is unlikely to motivate many secular thinkers to desert their camp and go over to that of the theists, and while it will be considered by devoted noncognitivists to be just another *reductio* of objectivism, it poses (though full of typos) an original, and serious, challenge for those with an inclination towards moral realism and no particular inclination towards God. It should be noted, though, that most of the metaethical conceptions examined in part II are primarily concerned with ontological and justificatory questions, and don't focus on questions of explaining the corresponding capacities, so it comes as no surprise that they lack the resources to account for them. At any rate, the author makes a convincing point in showing that there is an asymmetry between our theoretical and our practical ca-

pacities and thus a need for a different explanation of the latter, and that the secular realist cannot simply withdraw to questions of justification, declaring not to be in the business of explanation. It is now the secular objectivist's turn to come up with a convincing proposal.

References

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