Richard Joyce


Since the beginning of the millennium, Richard Joyce has made several influential contributions to contemporary metaethics. He has revived moral error theory, championed evolutionary debunking arguments, and developed and defended a position known as “moral fictionalism.” The twelve papers in this volume are organized around these themes—error theory, evolution and debunking, and projectivism and fictionalism—with four papers in each of the three categories. All papers but one are previously published. I had read nearly all of them before and I have made use of many of them in my own work. Needless to say, then, I think highly of Joyce’s work and I benefited from engaging with the material anew. The volume also contains a newly written introductory chapter, which I found helpful.

Some readers may be surprised and perhaps disappointed to discover that despite the title of Part 1 (“Error Theory”), it is difficult to find any positive arguments in favour of error theory. Joyce’s primary concern is not to defend error theory, but rather to clarify and explore the view, and to consider questions that arise in connection with it. The same kind of probing approach permeates the chapters in Parts 2 and 3. Joyce is generally more concerned to explore the views he engages with, rather than outright defending them. Readers might find themselves requesting more distinctive arguments, but whatever disappointment this invites need not last long, for Joyce’s exploratory discussions are always interesting, instructive, and useful, and sometimes ingenious. (An editorial shortcoming that will cause annoyance among readers is that cross-references are to the original publications and not to the papers as they appear in the volume.)

One interesting point that emerges already in the introduction (p. 3) is that the view Joyce favours is not a traditional form of error theory, but a kind of combination of error theoretic cognitivism and non-cognitivism. The view is developed in the volume’s first chapter, “Expressivism, Motivation Internalism, and Hume,” in which Joyce also tentatively interprets Hume as holding a metaethical view along these lines. On this hybrid view, the judgement that Hitler was evil expresses the belief or proposition that Hitler had the non-existent or non-instantiated property of being evil (hence the view is error theoretic), and the conative attitude of subscribing to a normative standard that condemns Hitler’s actions (p. 29).

This hybrid view is an interesting suggestion, but I doubt that Joyce has chosen a compelling way of illustrating it. As far as I understand, the main
argument in favour of the view that the meaning of moral judgements is partly non-cognitive is that it would be odd or incoherent to utter sentences like the following: “Hitler was evil. But I subscribe to no normative standard that condemns his actions” (pp. 32–33). I agree that it would sound odd to judge that Hitler was evil and go on to report that one subscribes to no normative standard that condemns his actions, but this could be because it is natural to take subscription to a normative standard to be a cognitive act, e.g., that of believing that the standard in question is correct. If it is assumed that subscription to a normative standard is a conative attitude, it is far from clear that it would be incoherent to judge, e.g., that Hitler was evil and go on to report that one subscribes to no normative standard that condemns his actions. We certainly expect speakers’ conative attitudes to match their moral judgements, but this gives little or no support to the hybrid view that “moral judgments express, as a matter of entrenched linguistic convention, both beliefs and conative attitudes” (p. 34, first emphasis added).

The remaining three chapters in Part 1 discuss questions that arise in connection with error theory, such as the relation between moral error theory and self-interest and ways in which defenders of various metaethical positions may end up unwittingly defending error theories, thereby becoming “accidental” error theorists. Joyce also devotes a paper to an exploration of “metaethical pluralism,” and in particular of the view that moral judgement and related concepts are too indeterminate for there to be a fact of the matter as to whether moral naturalism or moral scepticism (either error theory or non-cognitivism) is true. Joyce takes this possibility to imply that both positions may be permissible (p. 104). As I have argued elsewhere, however, if it is undecidable whether moral naturalism or moral scepticism is true, it is difficult to see how and why both positions could be (epistemically) permissible; if there is no fact of the matter and if there is sufficient evidence that this is so, then it seems that that would be the only (epistemically) permissible metaethical position to take (Johansson & Olson 2015: 603–604).

The first two chapters in Part 2 (“Evolution and Debunking”) are less concerned with metaethics proper than the rest of the volume. Here Joyce takes issue with nativist and anti-nativist accounts of moral judgement. The aforementioned indeterminacies of moral judgement and related concepts resurface in these discussions and, according to Joyce, make it difficult to determine the issue between nativist and anti-nativist views. As before, Joyce’s primary aim is not to offer decisive arguments, but to explore and clarify what it would mean for the capacity of moral judgement to be either an adaptation or a by-product (“spandrel”) of natural selection. Both chapters are illuminating and