Shelly Kagan, *Answering Moral Skepticism*[*]

Oxford University Press, 2023. 392pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-7668898-4

When I was an undergraduate, many people were drawn to the deflationary view of morality that had been put forward by the logical positivists. It was common to hear that moral judgements were merely expressions of the speaker's own subjective approval or disapproval of a certain course of action. On this view, "stealing is wrong" was not a genuine proposition that might be used to make a true statement, but merely boiled down to saying something like "stealing, ugh!".

The appeal of logical positivism gradually faded, but doubts about the idea of objective moral truth remain. Indeed, perhaps such doubts have always been there simmering beneath the surface, going right back to Classical times, when Protagoras put forward a sceptical and relativistic view of morality—one which Plato endeavoured to combat by proposing the diametrically opposite idea of a timeless and universal realm of value.

Coming down to our own time, it is clear that most of us continue earnestly to debate questions of morality as if there were objectively right or wrong answers to be discovered or arrived at. But should we be concerned that perhaps the whole idea of objective moral facts is an illusion? In this meticulously argued book, the distinguished moral philosopher and Yale academic Shelly Kagan aims to offer a systematic and detailed rebuttal of such moral scepticism. He describes himself as a "moral realist": that is, he believes that there is such a thing as objective morality, and that there are genuine moral facts. The sceptical challenge to this idea deserves, he thinks, to be taken seriously, and he therefore sets out to show that the moral realist has plausible answers to the various forms the challenge can take.

One common challenge to moral objectivity arises from the fact that people often disagree about moral questions. But this challenge is easily countered: people often disagree about scientific questions but this does not show that there are not objectively right answers in science. Or again, the sceptic about moral objectivity might point out that moral codes vary from society to society. But, in the first place, such variations are consistent with a measure of agreement on certain basic or fundamental moral principles; and, in the second place, even if it could be shown that there are fundamental differences, this would not in itself disprove the notion of objective moral truth, any more than differences with regard to fundamental scientific principles undermine the notion of objective scientific truth

But at this point a difficulty arises for the moral realist. If there is indeed a domain of objective moral facts, how are we supposed to gain access to such facts? Kagan puts the question thus: "Short of positing some 'spooky' and unscientific faculty for gaining access to moral facts, how could we ever come to know anything about ethics at all?" (p.1). Kagan's full answer to this is complicated and highly nuanced, but his short answer is "we gain moral knowledge by making careful use of moral intuitions" (p. 159).

Current English usage of the term 'intuition' is somewhat fuzzy, but as used by Kagan (in a sense that goes back to seventeenth-century usage, for example in Descartes) it refers to a kind of direct mental perception, analogous in many ways to ordinary visual observation. Visual observation is not, of course, infallible, but it is certainly indispensable for our knowledge of the world around us. And in a similar way, our moral intuitions, though not infallible, are, Kagan maintains, indispensable for gaining knowledge of moral facts. This might at first seem to leave moral intuition out on a limb as some kind of ontologically "spooky" faculty, but in fact it turns out that there are several other domains where intuition is indispensable: "We use—justifiably use!—our mathematical intuitions to develop our mathematical theories, our logical intuitions

[*] This is a typescript of the accepted manuscript of a review which appeared in *Society,* published online December 2024. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-024-01052-x

to develop our theories of logic … and we use—justifiably use!— our moral intuitions to develop our moral theories" (p. 165). So dismissing intuition altogether would put us on the unappealing path to global scepticism—to denying the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever.

Nevertheless, though we may readily grant the existence of objective logical and mathematical and scientific facts, there still seems something odd about the idea of a domain of moral facts. Many decades ago the British philosopher John Mackie summed up one version of the difficulty by deploying what he called "the argument from queerness". If there were objective values, he argued, "they would have to be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe" (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), p. 38).

Though he does not mention Mackie, Kagan in effect acknowledges the potential force of this kind of worry when he comes to unpack what is involved in being a realist about moral facts. One litmus test for something's counting as *real* is that, to put it crudely, it makes a difference to what is the case; it is "explanatorily potent", helping to "explain why things are the way they are" (p. 225). But now the moral sceptic will object that "this is a test that moral facts cannot pass, since they are explanatorily impotent. Unlike light waves, or sound waves, or gravity waves, for example, there are no 'ought waves' altering the world … Moral facts don't explain anything. So there aren't really any moral facts at all" (p. 228).

Even if this objection can be met (and Kagan plausibly shows that it can), there is a further difficulty about the notion of objective moral facts—one which connects with Mackie's charge that if they existed they would be very queer or odd sorts of thing. The difficulty has to do with what present-day philosophers have come to call "normativity": moral facts, assuming there to be such, do not appear to be reducible to descriptions alone, but seem to have a prescriptive or action-guiding force somehow built into them. Thus, to take Kagan's example, when we say that Joanna paid for the candy bar because it was the *right* thing to do, and because she was a *good* person, there is more to the notion of what it is to be a good person than purely descriptive properties such as, e.g., being disposed to pay for items one takes in stores. There is the additional implication that "one *should* be someone like this, that it is *better* to be that way" (p. 238). In short, moral realism, in positing the existence of moral facts, has to maintain that they are facts that possess *normative force*—facts that have, "built into them", as it were, some kind of strong requirement to act in a certain way. How can this be?

Readers now expecting some grand metaphysical theory to be deployed in order to solve this puzzle will be disappointed. And that is intentional, for Kagan's strategy turns out to be deliberately low-key and down-to-earth. Moral facts, he ends up maintaining, are "simply facts about reasons—reasons of a particular kind, reasons with a particular basis" (p. 363). So on Kagan's view, to refer to the fact that killing an innocent victim is wrong, or that there is a moral requirement not to kill the innocent, is to say that there is a reason not to kill this innocent person in front of me. What kind of reason? Well, a strong or categorical reason. In other words, it is not subject to 'ifs' or 'buts'—not dependent on the contingencies of individual motivation. "Categorical reasons—unlike hypothetical ones—will be facts which provide their rational support *independently* of the particular desires that the agent happens to have" (p. 300).

So in delving down into the nature of moral facts, Kagan thus ends up with what he takes to be the wholly unproblematic idea of *rational support*. And in the light of this, we are in effect invited to conclude that the suspicion of an intractable metaphysical puzzle attaching to the idea of objective moral facts, or facts possessing normative force, simply dissolves away:

> the idea of rational support—the idea of something constituting a reason—is a perfectly acceptable one. Instead of being persuaded by the skeptic's assertion that the idea is spooky or weird, unfamiliar or strange, we should simply remind ourselves of the fact that the

> notion of rational support—the notion of something being a reason—is in fact an utterly familiar one to all of us, one we make use of constantly, in every aspect of our lives. (p. 299)

As will perhaps by now be apparent, Kagan's argument in this finely wrought book is a highly intricate one. Indeed the above account simply indicates some of the steps in his argument, and even then in a necessarily compressed and simplified form. In the original, the path followed takes us through numerous subtle distinctions, and a large number of complicated "isms"—noncognitivism, relativism, moral nihilism, motive internalism, reasons internalism, and reductionism, to name but a few. Moreover the argument deliberately and designedly operates at an abstract level, being concerned entirely with the theoretical, second-order questions of "meta-ethics", with little or no discussion of substantive moral questions about how we should act. For all these reasons, it is not for the faint-hearted. But it is unquestionably a prime example of analytic philosophy conducted by a master practitioner of the art.

But at the end of the day, how successful is the book in its aims? As far as its negative aims are concerned, it seems to me to do an expert job of constructing persuasive rebuttals to moral scepticism in its various forms. But in its more positive task, of vindicating moral realism, it appears to me, for all its ingenuity, to fall short. The key suggestion we are left with is that the relatively low-key and widely accepted notion of *supporting reasons* will bear the main load when it comes to elucidating what moral facts amount to. But in my view there is a risk that this strategy slides into what the moral philosopher David Oderberg has recently called a "fetishization of reasons—thinking of reasons as having a life of their own, as though moral theory must have them in the driver's seat, steering us to moral judgments with their own special powers as manifested in this or that context" ('In Defence of Panmoralism', 2024).

Another way of putting this concern is as follows. If moral facts are simply facts about reasons, we still need to know what gives such reasons their special authority, their special normative force. For we are talking, remember, of reasons that retain their power and authority as requiring or forbidding certain actions even when the agent disregards them entirely or is wholly disinclined to comply. What Kagan has presented us with is a cluster of inter-linked concepts—moral facts, normativity, supporting reasons, and so on—but, so far as I can see, nothing that grounds or underpins the special categorical status of certain reasons as "providing rational support independently of the desires the agent happens to have." What do I mean here by grounding or underpinning? Well, in the domain of science, what underpins the scientific facts that are claimed to hold is the way the world actually is independently of us—the actual configuration of the rocks and stones and planets and stars and atoms and so on. But Kagan's brand of moral realism, to my mind, does not give a satisfying account of what ultimately underpins moral facts.

It is interesting that Kagan, who throughout his intricate account of moral realism is so meticulous in mapping out all kinds of possible meta-ethical moves and counter-moves, scarcely pauses to consider the option of a theistic framework for understanding moral objectivity. In line with the resolutely secularist temper of most contemporary analytic philosophy, it is just not on his list for serious consideration. To be sure, the theistic world view is not free from its own problems. But one might think that at the very least it deserves consideration as a possible framework within which a home might be found for the strangely compelling idea of authoritative reasons for action that retain their categorical normative power independently of the wayward fluctuations of human desire. There are, of course, other metaphysical frameworks than theism, one such being that of Iris Murdoch who, in place of the God of traditional theism espoused a kind of Platonism about goodness ("the Good is the reality of which God is the dream", *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), p. 496). Whether such Platonism about "the Good" fares better than its theistic counterpart is an issue that cannot be adjudicated here. But as far as Kagan is concerned, with all due credit both to the philosophical

acumen with which he expounds his notion of "supporting reasons", and also to his determination (which I would strongly support) to defend moral realism, one is left at the end of *Answering Moral Skepticism* with the feeling that a secure defence needs more robust metaphysical resources than he is prepared to countenance.

Reviewer: John Cottingham is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading and an Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Oxford University. He has published extensively on early-modern philosophy (especially Descartes), on moral philosophy, and on the philosophy of religion, where his books include *Philosophy and the Good Life*, *The Spiritual Dimension*, *In Search of the Soul*, and, most recently, *The Humane Perspective: Philosophical Reflections on Human Nature, the Search for Meaning, and the Role of Religion* (OUP, 2024).

Email: jgcottingham@mac.com