

Miller, Alexander, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*, Oxford: Polity Press, 2003, pp. xii + 316, \$64.95 (cloth), 29.95 (paper).

My initial hope when I first saw Miller's book was that here at least would be a work which satisfies the long standing need for a comprehensive introduction to contemporary metaethics which is accessible enough to be employed in advanced undergraduate courses and introductory graduate seminars. This hope was only partially realized, however, as Miller ends up oscillating between clear presentations of extant debates in the recent literature and his own extended attempts to determine where the truth of the matter lies. The result is an interesting book that likely will appeal both to those looking for a classroom text in metaethics as well as to experts on the relevant issues.

Miller divides his introduction into ten chapters. After briefly introducing some terminology and taxonomic classification in the first, he devotes the second chapter to Moore's open-question argument as well as to recent versions of the argument defended by Thomas Baldwin and jointly by Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton. Chapter three focuses on Ayer's version of emotivism, and not only outlines the view but also considers important problems that it faces as well as various ways in which an emotivist might go about motivating the rejection of Moorean non-naturalism.

Chapters four and five are devoted to the more sophisticated contemporary non-cognitivist proposals by Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard respectively. Miller provides a clear and helpful overview of Blackburn's quasi-realist project, focusing in particular on Blackburn's response to the Frege-Geach problem and on John McDowell's well-known

objections to quasi-realism. In the next chapter, Miller presents Gibbard's own novel solution to the Frege-Geach problem.

Turning from non-cognitivism to cognitivism, Miller reserves chapter six for Mackie's error theory and his argument from queerness against moral realism. Here we also find sections on Locke's view of color and Wright's objection to error theories. This discussion naturally leads to a consideration of response-dependent or dispositionalist views in chapter seven. Miller only considers one form such a view can take, namely that according to which the moral is determined by the opinions of cognitively ideal agents. Miller ends up rejecting such a view on the grounds that the specification of the ideal conditions for judgment will inevitably end up appealing to moral concepts or facts, thereby contradicting the express aim of the view to be giving a reductive account of the moral.

In chapters eight and nine, Miller next considers non-reductive and reductive moral realists positions. The Cornell realists are taken to be the main representatives of the former view, and here Miller devotes most of his attention to the well-known debate between Sturgeon and Harman on the explanatory role of moral properties. Miller argues that Harman gets the better of the exchange even if the non-reductive realist were to make use of more sophisticated theories of explanation such as Jackson and Pettit's notion of 'program explanation' or Wiggins' 'vindictory explanations.'

When it comes to reductive forms of moral realism, Miller devotes an extensive amount of space to explicating and defending Railton's account of non-moral and moral value. Along the way we also find sections devoted to criticizing Michael Smith's arguments for motivational internalism and moral rationalism, as well as a defense of analytic moral functionalism from Smith's permutation problem.

Finally, Miller ends with a very unsympathetic treatment of McDowell's realist non-naturalism, as well as a brief consideration of Smith on the Humean theory of motivation.

In the end, then, the most promising positions in contemporary metaethics turn out to be quasi-realism and reductive realism. Moorean non-naturalism, traditional emotivism, fictionalism, dispositionalism, non-reductive realism, and McDowellian realism all end up taking lots of abuse.

Miller clearly exhibits an impressive acquaintance with large segments of the metaethics literature, and his writing is often clear and rigorous. In the remainder, I will raise some concerns about how well the book succeeds in providing an 'introduction' to contemporary metaethics.

Accessibility. Much of Miller's book should be accessible to graduate students in philosophy with little background in metaethics. However there are sections which may prove challenging even to those who work in the area. Often this happens when Miller simply quotes or briefly sketches a philosopher's position or argument without taking the time to explain what, for example, motivated the position in the first place or how exactly the argument is supposed to go. One example is the presentation of Wiggins's objection to reductive naturalism [202-3]. Wiggins's argument is rather complex, requiring two entire pages just to state in numbered premises whose meaning often isn't readily apparent. Yet rather than spend a paragraph or two to try and explain what is going on for those who might not have read Wiggins' paper beforehand, Miller instead immediately presents his own response to the argument. Similarly, I found the long discussion of McDowell on 'disentangling' to be very tough going [244-256].

Scope. As the summary above suggests, Miller's book is very comprehensive and nicely covers many of the important views, positive arguments, and objections. One noticeable omission is the absence of any discussion of relativism, especially since Mackie uses an

argument from moral diversity as one of the two main arguments for his error theory. It also would have been nice to see at least an initial discussion of the recent debates having to do with non-cognitivism and minimalism. Finally, as the chapter on dispositionalism is a mere nine pages in length, it could have been supplemented with a presentation of David Lewis' important view.

Balance. As the last comment suggests, the space and attention devoted to certain theories comes across as unbalanced in several places. Thus Miller uses twenty three pages to lay out Railton's view in the chapter on reductive naturalism, whereas the chapter on norm-expressivism only gestures at some features of Gibbard's position in two paragraphs while devoting the entire remainder of the chapter to Gibbard's response to the Frege-Geach problem. Similarly, many have considered the motivation argument (the conjunction of motivational internalism and the Humean theory of motivation) to be the most significant challenge to moral cognitivism. But rather than summarizing the main positive arguments and objections that have been raised with respect to each of this argument's premises, Miller instead only attacks some of Michael Smith's discussion of them in *The Moral Problem*. While these criticisms of Smith might be important to specialists, they do little to help other readers gain an overall sense of the contemporary terrain in this area.

Tone. My final concern is closely related. Much of the first half of Miller's book exhibits an appropriate degree of restraint on his part as he largely tries to lay out various arguments and positions as clearly and carefully as possible. Towards the end, however, the chapters start to read like those in an original monograph, with Miller largely taking over the critical discussion and attempting to adjudicate the relevant disputes. In many cases, he takes himself to have adequately responded to a prominent objection against a given theory or to have advanced an

objection of his own which shows that a given metaethical position is implausible. Again, some of this discussion no doubt will be of interest to specialists. And in general I have no objection to some authorial intervention in introductions and guidebooks. But the degree to which Miller intervenes and the forcefulness with which he presents his conclusions will, I suspect, give a rather skewed impression of the viable options and arguments in contemporary metaethics to undergraduates, beginning graduate students, and other non-specialists who approach Miller's book with an open mind. Some will likely disagree with me about this methodological preference, and it may just be a quirk of mine. But I always prefer to have the views, arguments, and objections laid out clearly before me in works of this kind, so that I can then try to come up with a cost/benefit assessment of my own.

Despite these concerns, Miller's book should be seriously considered both by those looking to teach on contemporary metaethics as well as those who are interested in what he has to say about a host of important topics in the field.

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