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Review - Regard for Reason in the Moral Mind

by Joshua May

Oxford University Press, 2018

Review by Michael Klenk

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Times have been challenging for optimists about reasonable, altruistic, and moral human conduct. Events and developments in the public sphere, think of fake news and populism, suggest to many that reason and morality are decaying. Worse still, empirical investigations of moral judgment and behaviour seem to support such pessimism about morality (or sober realism, depending on your view). Several lines of research in psychology and sociology have been taken up by philosophers to suggest that moral judgment is grounded in emotions, not reason, or incapable of being justified in the first place. Moreover, rationally motivated moral behaviour appears to be but a figment of enlightenment imagination, with self-interested desires at the bottom of it all. Is there no 'regard for reason in the moral mind'?

Joshua May takes a hard, serious look at the evidence, arguing that "we should not oversell the science nor commit ordinary moral thinking to the flames" (p. 4) but instead adopt an "optimistic rationalism," according to which "reason play a fundamental role" in moral judgment and motivation (p. 18). The result is a systematic, impressively thorough, and convincing defence of the viability of moral rationalism. It excels in a detailed discussion of the experimental record, coupled with exceptionally clear discussions of the commitments of moral rationalism, and stands out from similar defences of rationalism by discussing both moral cognition and moral motivation. It offers no novel a priori argument about the truth of rationalism, or its invincibility from empirical challenges, but instead takes the empirical challenge head-on, ploughing through a plethora of studies to show that, as of now, rationalism still stands. For that reason, it is the best defence of moral rationalism against empirical pessimism available. After a summary of the book, I will address two of points that I found less convincing.

Chapter 1 introduces the challenge of empirical pessimism, which May distinguishes into pessimism about moral cognition and moral motivation. The former is fuelled by sentimentalism (roughly, the view that emotions are necessary and sufficient for moral judgment) and debunking arguments (roughly, arguments to the effect that the origins of our moral judgments imply that these judgments are epistemically unjustified). Challenges to moral motivation are fuelled by egoism, the view that every action is ultimately motivated by self-interest, Humeanism, the view that desires, not reasons, ultimately motivate action, and Situationism, the view that moral principles rarely motivate actual behaviour. May's Optimistic Rationalism is a denial of each of these claims.

In chapter 2, May demonstrates his modus operandi for the remainder of the book: after laying out the commitments of the relevant philosophical view under discussion, in this case sentimentalism, he proceeds to discuss in detail a wealth of studies allegedly in support of sentimentalism. He concludes that there is "no compelling evidence" (27) for the view.

Chapter 3 defends the view that reason at least sometimes influences moral judgment. May first argues that concern for consequences in typical experimental setups (e.g. choosing to sacrifice 1 instead of 5) indicates already that reasoning plays a role in moral judgment. Moreover, May interprets the findings of Trolleyology as suggesting that people do make their moral judgment in accordance with moral principles, e.g. the Doctrine of Double Effect. He does not mean to suggest that these are valid principles, but that they generate our moral judgments, contradicting sentimentalism.

Chapter 4 raises a dilemma for attempts to debunk the justification of moral judgments. According to May, proponents of debunking arguments must identify a pervasive influence on our moral beliefs (empirical premise) that is epistemically worrisome (normative premise). However, May argues that "one can identify an influence on a large class of moral beliefs that is either defective or substantial, but not both" (p. 82). So, when one identifies a powerful influence on moral beliefs, then it turns out not to be defective, and when one identifies a defective influence, it turns out to be not persuasive, affecting only some moral beliefs. In either case, concludes May, attempts to debunk all moral beliefs fail empirically.

That leaves the option of selective debunking, which May addresses in chapter 5. In particular, May considers consistency debunking (to wit, claims to the effect that if you hold two inconsistent beliefs, you ought to give one up) and peer disagreement. He attempts to defuse the former by arguing that, logically, a contradiction does not tell which of the contradiction beliefs ought to be given up. Moreover, even though there might be reason to withhold judgment about the conflicting pair of beliefs, such debunking arguments are limited in scope, affecting one pair of beliefs at a time. About disagreement debunking, May plays down the threat with familiar arguments: foundational disagreement may not be widespread, and it might not be among peers.

Taking himself to have established the viability of moral cognition, May turns to moral motivation in chapters 6 to 9 in a cascading counter-offensive against pessimism. It works as if May addresses an interlocutor pessimistic about moral motivation. Whatever challenge the imagined interlocutor puts forward, May seems to have the answer.

To begin with, aren't all actions ultimately motivated by self-interest? No, argues May in chapter 6. At the very least, some actions are motivated by a concern for others. The fact that these actions are at the same time beneficial for the agent does not refute the point in favour of altruism. That is, rather than interpreting such cases as mutualism (where multiple people's self-interest happens to be aligned), May shows they are best explained as involving genuine concern for others (for their own sake). Importantly, May also addresses and convincingly rebuts the challenge that empathy may lead to self-other merging (to wit, I experience someone else's harm as genuinely my own) and thus fail to count as altruism.

Still, even if we sometimes act for the sake of others, is there any evidence that moral *beliefs* (rather than emotions) play a role in motivation? Yes, argues May in chapter 7. By discussing experiments involving temptations (e.g. to cheat on one's spouse) and rationalising behaviour, May shows that normative beliefs "play a more prominent role in ordinary motivation" than pessimists allow (p. 155). Temptation, he argues, very often involves an explicit or implicit appeal to reason (e.g. 'I deserve this!'). So, even in seemingly paradigmatically desire-driven behaviour such as giving in to temptation, reason and moral beliefs play a role, or so May argues. Likewise, May argues that evidence about moral hypocrisy, and involved rationalisations, suggest that moral principles motivate people. This is an interesting move, insofar as rationalising behaviour is often taken by pessimists to indict morality, while May puts it to use in his defence of rationalism.

Even if that is so, aren't all actions, though perhaps mediated by moral beliefs, ultimately grounded in desires, not beliefs? No, argues May in chapter 8. Based on mostly theoretical, methodological considerations about theory choice (e.g. considerations about parsimony), May argues that there is no reason to suggest that desires must be the most foundational currency in causing behaviour.

But surely that does not show that we are motivated by the right reasons very often, which would be required to uphold moral optimism? False again, argues May in chapter 9. Raising an analogue of the earlier dilemma for debunkers, May argues that the influences on moral motivation are either pervasive (affecting a large part if not all instances of moral motivation) or worrisome (so that they would count in favour of pessimism), but not both. This is especially clear with egoism. Pessimists might interpret egoistic motivation widely, suggesting that, say, the desire to stick to one's moral principles even at great personal costs counts as self-interested. This might be a pervasive influence, as May shows, but it is hardly a worrisome influence: after all, that looks more like moral integrity, rather than egoism.

With the evidence for pessimism about moral cognition and motivation thoroughly assessed, May concludes that we have reason for cautious optimism about moral rationalism. He ends the book with a brief recap and some discussion of the implications of his findings. The anti-rationalism he combatted was a conjunction of universal statements, so to defeat it he has shown that *some* genuine regard for moral reason can be defended (in judgment and behaviour). He concedes, however, that such behaviour is not pervasive and thus ends on proposing ways to enhance moral motivation and moral cognition.

All in all, the book is an impressive achievement, and a treasure trove of detailed discussion of the relevant empirical record that is poised to play an important part in the debate between rationalists and their foes. For instance, many intricacies of May's discussion offer an opportunity for non-rationalists to develop better experimental paradigms.

At the same time, I was not convinced by May's defence against debunking, of neither the global nor the selective kind. May's rebuttal of evolutionary debunking of all moral beliefs is, as he notes himself (p. 96), a variant of so-called third-factor responses to debunking arguments. Typical third-factor explanations say that some common factor explains both why we endorse a particular set of moral beliefs *and* why those beliefs are mostly true; that common, or third-factor, is usually a moral principle of the form 'survival is at least somewhat good' (cf. Enoch 2010). Evolution explains why we form related moral beliefs of that sort, the moral facts explain why those beliefs are true, and the moral principle is supposed to explain why our moral beliefs are reliable. May's variant of the third-factor reply does not construe the third-factor as a simple moral principle, but as a substantive normative theory such as "Kantianism, contractualism, or contractarianism" (p. 95). If any of those were correct, claims May, then "it will be far from a coincidence that evolutionary forces nudged" moral beliefs to be on track (p. 95). However, as any third-factor account, May's variant risks begging the question against debunkers. Evolution may well (ultimately) explain why we have, for example, contractarian moral intuitions. But the fact that we take contractarianism to entail the moral truth is then *also* ultimately explained by evolution. Debunkers will demand justification for taking said theory as the yardstick to measure the reliability of our moral beliefs. They have reason to be suspicious: after all, picking just about any recently defended normative theory will yield the conclusion that our moral beliefs are reliable simply because the theory presumably is being defended for jibing will with our evolved moral intuitions. Of course, the open question is whether debunkers are just posing a general sceptical challenge all over again, demanding (implausibly) moral-intuition-independent proof of our moral reliability. May, in any case, does not advance the debate on this point but merely assumes that the forced fit between evolutionary pressures and moral truth ought to appease debunkers.

Moreover, pessimists about moral rationalism may question the value of May's optimistic victory. May does not defend the strong view that we are, sufficiently often, moral in the sense that our moral judgments are justified and true and that our moral

behaviour is virtuous. Instead, he defends the somewhat limited view that we have *no reason to suspect that our moral judgments are false* and that we at least *aim to be virtuous*, that is, we aim to and sometimes do act in line with reason and moral principles. To illustrate the difference between both projects, consider two theories about your prospects of succeeding in a maths test. The first project is like showing that you'd get the right result in the test and that you'll use the correct derivative rules. May's project, however, is roughly analogous to showing that there is no good reason to think that you'd ultimately rely on your gut feeling in the test, nor that you'll get it wrong, and that you'll be at least somewhat interested in following what you believe are the correct derivative rules. It would not show you *that* you'll be likely to follow the correct derivative rules. This point is significant for defending rationalism. When May shows that people are concerned to act in line with what they take to be the correct moral principles, then this does not imply that they act in line with *the* correct moral principles. May would probably agree that, for all he has shown, it is possible that our moral minds have a high regard for reason, but that we are still morally bad: what we take to be moral reasons just aren't moral reasons. For example, Fiske and Rai argue that even perpetrators of heinous, immoral acts such as rape seem sometimes motivated by what the perpetrators take to be moral reason (i.e. they think along the lines of 'the victim deserved it') (cf. Fiske and Rai 2015).

Pessimists about *correct* moral behaviour may thus be unfazed by May's argument. This is by no means a problem within the book's scope, because May does not target pessimists about moral behaviour in the strong sense. But a methodological problem looms nonetheless. May needs a notion of moral principle to show that moral motivation is orientated toward it. However, he cannot, and does not, define it substantively (e.g. by giving a list of correct moral principles), because that would rule out some of his examples about cheating, and cases such as those described by Fiske and Rai. So, May has to use a formal definition of moral principle so that we can assess when people are motivated by moral principles. But most existing formal definitions of morality appear unconvincing. May himself criticises a formerly popular candidate, the conventional/moral distinction. Thus, an open question raised by the book is how to operationalise moral principles for experimental studies on moral motivation sensibly and expediently.

To conclude, I heartily recommend this book to all researchers engaged with moral psychology – rationalists will find resources to defend their views; their foes will see opportunities for improving their experiments to challenge optimistic rationalism. The book will work well in graduate seminars on moral psychology, but, since it is quite dense at times, perhaps less so at the undergraduate level.

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