



Practical Knowledge

Selected Essays

KIERAN SETIYA

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

OXFORD MORAL THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

This book has two themes: the nature of intentional action and the foundations of ethics. What is it to act for reasons and so to act intentionally? And why are certain facts reasons to act in one way or another, considerations that count in favour of doing so? Such reasons fix what we ought to do.

Each question is of interest in itself and some of the essays deal with one to the exclusion of the other. But the themes are closely related. In particular, there is an approach to ethics I have called ‘ethical rationalism’, which aims to derive the normative facts—what there is reason for us to do—from the nature of agency or the will.¹ According to the rationalist or ‘constitutivist’, the standards of practical reason are explained by what it is to act intentionally, or to have the capacity to do so. In one way or another, action theory is the basis of ethics.

My relationship to this approach is complicated and it plays a special role in the essays to come. Unlike some, I think it is possible to construct a compelling argument from premises in the philosophy of action to ethical conclusions: from the metaphysics of agency to the norms of practical reason.² This strategy has much wider application than is often assumed. While the rationalist approach has been associated with Kant, who aimed to derive the moral law from the idea that we act ‘under the idea of freedom’, a less ambitious rationalist might derive the norm of means–end efficiency from the role of desire in motivation,

1. This terminology is introduced in Setiya 2007.

2. For accounts of this argument, see ‘Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good’ (Setiya 2013a; available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/phimp/3521354.0013.009/1>), ‘Intention, Plans, and Ethical Rationalism’ (this volume: Ch. 10) and ‘Akrasia and the Constitution of Agency’ (this volume: Ch. 11).