Review of Daniel Star’s *Knowing Better*

by Kurt Sylvan

*Knowing Better* seeks to resolve an alleged tension between two facts: that (1) ‘sophisticated philosophical reflection is unnecessary for ordinary virtue’, but that (2) the moral philosopher’s search for fundamental principles is nonetheless a ‘highly fruitful enterprise’ (vii). (1) and (2) strike Star as *prima facie* dissonant because he thinks it can be ‘difficult to see’ how we ‘could really count as good people, and reliably so, if [we] are not being guided by [fundamental] principles’ (vii-viii). Star’s resolution invokes an analysis of normative reasons he previously defended in collaboration with Stephen Kearns—viz., *Reasons as Evidence* (RE), according to which reasons to φ consist in evidence that one ought to φ. According to Star, RE helps to reconcile (1) and (2) by undergirding a new two-tiered account of moral thinking that lets virtuous deliberation proceed without knowledge of fundamental reasons while preserving some link—an evidential one—between reasons in good deliberation and fundamental reasons. Even if there were no tension between (1) and (2) or RE were irrelevant to resolving it—two concerns I will raise—the book would remain important as a novel defense of RE and an outline of an intriguing bigger picture in which RE is pivotal. The book’s four chapters also read engagingly as self-contained arguments for RE and novel accounts of the structure of moral theory, virtue, and good practical reasoning.

Before turning to the chapters, it is worth mentioning a doubt about the supposed friction between (1) and (2). To many epistemologists, it will be a familiar thought that ordinary reasoning might qualify as competent simply by being in sufficiently reliable conformity with fundamental norms in suitable environments, without necessary mediation by evidence. This reliabilist account needn’t be revisionary or condescending toward ordinary reasoners like Hare’s two-level utilitarianism purportedly is (8-12). What Hare gets wrong, one might think, are the fundamental reasons, not the thought that ordinary virtue is a matter of reliable conformity to them. If Hare’s view fails for this reason, it is unclear why we cannot retain a reliabilist picture of the relationship between ordinary virtue and fundamental reasons. This picture needn’t be consequentialist: the fundamental reasons could be deontological, and reliability could be important in virtue of illuminating *non-accidental conformity* to them, not just in virtue of its instrumental value.

Right or wrong, the obvious coherence of this picture makes it hard to believe that (1) and (2) conflict even *prima facie*. Star might think a burden remains for reliabilists that he avoids—viz., ‘it is essential that [she] make clear *how*—and not merely assert *that*—ordinary ethical thinking is in a position to be reliable’ (36). But it is unclear why it is the philosopher’s job to give this explanation. If we want to explain why our epistemic folkways are reliable, we might be better off looking to cognitive science. Star must pass a similar explanatory buck: even if sufficient evidence that one ought to φ were necessarily a reliable indicator that one ought to φ, it would be an empirical question whether and why commonsense moral reasons *are* sufficient evidence of this kind.

Luckily, I think Star oversimplifies the book by advertising it as a solution to this not-so-puzzling puzzle. There are, however, are other worries for each chapter.

Chapter 1 gives an abductive argument for RE from its ability to explain the consistency of (1) and (2)—an explanation which might be desirable even if (1) and (2) were patently consistent, since even patent facts can deserve explanation. Star’s thought seems to be that given RE, we should expect virtuous deliberation to start with the mundanities of folk intuition and move toward insights about fundamental reasons. In other words, assuming RE, we should expect moral thought to have a two-tiered structure that reconciles (1) and (2).

But it is unclear why Star thinks RE makes this prediction. RE is a metaphysical analysis of reasons. As Star agrees (16; 106), it is fallacious to infer deliberative structure from metaphysical structure. It’s hence unclear why RE forecasts any particular structure for moral thinking. Star’s attempt to have it both ways is striking: he notes (16) that it doesn’t follow from the fact that fundamental reasons ground derivative reasons that deliberation starts with fundamental reasons, but then argues (17) that we should expect deliberation about fundamental reasons to start with evidence if we agree that reasons are grounded in evidence. Perhaps Star thinks the metaphysical relation between evidence and reasons is importantly different from the metaphysical relation between fundamental and derivative reasons, where this difference permits the inference in the former case but not the latter. The relations are different: the relation between evidence and reasons is one of ‘real definition’, while the relation between fundamental and derivative reasons isn’t. Still, A’s having its real definition in B doesn’t suggest that deliberation starts with B. Water’s real definition is H2O, but deliberation doesn’t start at the chemical level.

Chapter 2’s support for RE trades on similarly questionable assumptions. Its central argument (59) concludes that evidence about what one ought to do constitutes reasons from (a) the ‘Razian insight’ that something is a reason if deliberation in reliable conformity with reason treats it as one, and (b) the thought that deliberation in reliable conformity with reason treats evidence about oughts as giving reasons. But no part of RE’s metaphysical claim follows from (a) and (b). What follows is that what provides evidence that one ought to φ also necessarily stands in the reason-relation to φ-ing. But if one relation entails another, it doesn’t follow that the former grounds the latter. Knowledge entails belief, but it is hardly clear that knowledge grounds belief (*pace* Star’s favorite epistemologist).

Star proceeds in Chapter 3 to argue that we shouldn’t tightly link virtue to rightness or goodness, and to give an RE-based account of virtue. His arguments turn on two evil demon cases. In the first, the demon explicitly promises to kill several people every time you act *virtuously*, though not if you act *rightly*. This case allegedly shows that virtuous action and right action diverge. In the second case, the demon will secretly kill several people anytime anyone acts from a character state we’d normally deem virtuous. This case allegedly undermines a moderate consequentialist account of virtue.

Star’s targets are, I agree, mistaken. But his cases don’t necessitate an account of virtue in terms of responsiveness to evidence about oughts. For these cases don’t undermine a reliabilist account on which virtues are dispositions to reliably do what is favored by the fundamental reasons, where these dispositions needn’t be mediated by possessed evidence of rightness (which Huck Finn suggests is unnecessary). Star’s own account initially shares this mould, but loses attraction thanks to RE.

Star’s view may itself be undermined by demon counterexamples if it can explain the reliability of virtue as advertised. Imagine that Edna’s apparent evidence about specific ought facts is systematically misleading, owing to a demon’s deceiving her about the non-moral facts. She arguably isn’t responding to good evidence, since it isn’t a reliable indicator of the facts. But if it is intuitive that Star’s second agent is virtuous, it should also be intuitive that Edna is virtuous. Star might respond by denying that the evidence is necessarily a reliable indicator. But then his account would fail to explain the reliability of ordinary virtue as he outlines. He could instead index the reliability of evidence to certain environments. But the moderate consequentialist could make a parallel move. I worry, then, that Star’s view either doesn’t explain reliability as advertised, is undermined by demon counterexamples, or survives alongside moderate consequentialism.

In Chapter 4, Star provides a final argument for RE, according to which RE provides the ‘missing ingredients’ for a satisfactory version of the view that knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning. Star thinks the existing version of the view ‘provides *no* guidance when it comes to determining *which* known facts are reasons, or *which* of one’s reasons it is appropriate to act on’ (113). But the knowledge norms defended by Hawthorne and Stanley weren’t intended to provide such guidance. To criticize them for not providing such guidance is akin to criticizing a stove’s manual for not containing good recipes. Star considers a related worry (114), insisting that the norms are still ‘less informative than one might have originally hoped’. But readers in the know wouldn’t have this hope.

The chapter also suggests that one needs rough ethical knowledge to possess reasons. Here Star flirts with the overintellectualization he sought to avoid. One might instead think that having rational *de dicto* normative beliefs is unnecessary for possessing reasons: all one must do is competently treat the reason-giving facts in a way that reliably tracks normative relations. Star’s insistence that we need normative knowledge to mediate between non-normative evidence and appropriate action is puzzling given that it is crucial to his story that rough ethical knowledge is non-inferential. If such knowledge doesn’t require evidence, why should responsiveness to reasons for action? A better picture would hold that unreflective competence provides a common, direct foundation for both virtuous acts and the virtuous beliefs that, in creatures with normative concepts, constitute normative knowledge.

Although I ended *Knowing Better* feeling more puzzled than when I began, this fact hardly impugns its quality as philosophy. It ranks alongside some of the best work in recent normative philosophy, stimulating readers with many new ideas and arguments, numerous of which I lacked space to address. The virtuous will know better than to give it a miss.