THE NORMATIVE CHALLENGE IN ETHICS

BOOK REVIEW

HANNO SAUER: *Debunking Arguments in Ethics*
Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 243

by Anastasia Marinopoulou
Hellenic Open University

Exerting critique on ethics itself and examining how ethics connects with normativity and epistemic processes is an innovative combination of topics to consider in a philosophy book. The present book gives a full and particularly thorough account of debunking arguments in ethics and at the same time remains severely critical of ethics and its relevance to normativity. Hanno Sauer's book is an insightful critique of ethics as well as of its epistemic potential.

The introduction to the volume sets the normative significance of genealogies and their practical application center stage as '… many things we do or believe … have been pieced together without any central rational oversight' in the writer's words (p. 3). People ask normative questions but throughout the centuries the methodology has been missing and - what is more - the conjunction of *is* and *ought* has created a gap but also encapsulated the moral task of finding a 'good' life for people. However, the writer provides a comprehensive account of what normative theory is and combines it with an analysis of the concept of disagreement, which serves to define what it is to be normative. The latter consideration of disagreement is a recurrent theme in the book and perhaps the most fascinating one particularly in the second part where the focus is moral and political disagreement.

The first chapter prioritizes issues of methodology or 'typology' as the writer prefers to call them and examines the meaning of debunking in ethics, namely whether it is

selective or global and whether ethics refers to obsolete, symmetrical or inconsistent topics. It concludes with some important remarks, first, that the moral outlook of the current times might be in need of an alternative which might also include both a causal and a normative analysis of morals and, second, that a normative argument examines whether causality in ethics is defective or not. The second chapter is in direct continuation of the first by examining the metaethical turn of defusing debunking, meaning that '… the required changes should take place not in our moral beliefs themselves but in the beliefs we have *about* those beliefs' as the writer indicates (page 49, referring to Sharon Street). The normativity process in ethics should therefore remain intact and, regardless of its indispensability or not to debunk arguments, evaluative beliefs can serve as a guide in order to articulate either metaethical or normative considerations.

Chapter three furthers the debunking argument in a twofold way by inquiring into the empirical and the normative when considering moral beliefs and their justifications. In fact, the writer maintains that debunking arguments have to be studied according to their '… *scope* of the descriptive and the *depth* of the normative premise' (p. 70). Throughout the chapter the writer is concerned with the issue of debunking as to whether it provides the best explanation either in its object-focused or agent-focused aspect. Nevertheless, moral beliefs and their accountability can be optimally examined with regards to truth and that appears as the main focus of the chapter's argument if not of the entire book.

Furthermore, the author engages throughout the book in a critique of debunking. Such a critique renders debunking a medium of self-reflection for ethics: although debunking can lead to moral skepticism it can also act as an enlightenment mechanism for those who practice it. It is epistemically welcome and although hard to accept sometimes or all the time, debunking bestows this form of austere critique upon science that can be hard but necessary to apply. In a form of Kantian argument, the writer attributes to debunking the potential to '… lead us out of self-incurred immaturity' (p. 74), nonetheless, the question that the reader poses is that it also has to be clarified who 'us' are: the readers, the scientists, science itself, ethics, or some other collective subject or actor?

The main issue in the fourth chapter is the nature of moral disagreement. Through a detailed, balanced and profound analysis the author reaches the core twofold point of moral disagreement which stands for, first, the explanation of the existent disagreement

and second, the essence of the disagreement *per se.* It is perhaps one of the most captivating arguments of the book that develops into an insinuated comparison: the citation of moments of moral convergence throughout history that signify major political trends as well. The chapter concludes with a rather relativistic approach focusing on the absence of a universal morality for people to agree on. Although compromising in its line, it appears to be placing ethics and debunking arguments under a situational perspective where 'custom, and only custom, is king' according to the author (p. 118). Small wonder then that although nobody claims the absolute universality of ethical arguments; nobody argues in their defense too, allowing then everything to be moral and immoral at the same time.

Chapter five's focal point is debunking conservatism as far as political disagreement is concerned. The author emphasizes that political decisions are based on moral values whilst public discourse and potential agreement can serve as driving forces towards political deliberation. Despite the conjunction between moral values and political arguments that the author prioritizes, it is at this point that political philosophy might have a word to say arguing for the disciplinary autonomy of political considerations from ethics where 'genuine moral reasoning' (p. 143) is not a *sine qua non* condition for deliberation and the resolution of political disagreements. Chapter six deals with thought experiments in ethics and examines people's reactions when facing moral scenarios or situations of moral judgement in real life. The critique of the *ought*, the *is* and the *can* renders the chapter an exciting problematic considering possible and real outcomes of thought experiments and their complexities.

Chapter seven differentiates itself significantly from the previous chapters with debunking doctrines and examines how normativity relates to contingency in ethics. According to Sauer, when normativity recedes, various contingent features such as intentionality, knowledge or causality prevail in people's judgements. Such an argument passes into the eighth chapter which begins with the continuation of the previous argument where debunking instigates when we trace the dubious genesis of moral beliefs. In the last pages of the book and the final chapter, debunking associates with empirical facts which - when coupled with normativity - can potentially bear moral impact. Therefore, debunking appears not as a moral *telos* but as a critical *process in process* and normativity as developing into practical reason.

Last but not least, the book comprises a full account of arguments on debunking but to the reader the most challenging point is perhaps the association of normative

arguments with critical thinking processes (the focus is from p. 218 onwards). There is much to be written on such a point and the ambitious reader would probably be very strongly motivated to read more on the latter point by Hanno Sauer. There is much to be written by him and much to be studied by readers on how critical thinking becomes the challenge of normativity.