

**Tamler Sommers**

*Relative Justice: Cultural Diversity, Free Will, and Moral Responsibility* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 230 pp. ISBN 9781400840250 (hbk). Hardback/Paperback: \$39.50/-.

Many traditional accounts of free will and moral responsibility have *universalist* aspirations, which according to Tamler Sommers, means that these theories “aim to provide conditions or criteria for moral responsibility that apply universally, for all agents, for all societies” (p. 11). So understood, the primary aim of this volume is to put such theories on notice. Specifically, Sommers argues that theories of responsibility which purport to universal applicability are indefensible. Because his primary objection to universalist theories turns on methodological considerations, Sommers aptly names his view “metaskepticism.” In Part I of *Relative Justice*, Sommers mounts a defense of metaskepticism, and in Part II, Sommers explores its consequences.

As Sommers defines it, metaskepticism about moral responsibility is the thesis according to which *there is no theory of moral responsibility that is objectively correct*. In defense of this thesis, Sommers begins Part I by arguing (in Chapter 1, “The Appeal to Intuition”) that “intuitive plausibility” is the ultimate arbiter for theories of moral responsibility. He motivates this claim by surveying the free will and moral responsibility literatures and by demonstrating that all universalist views seem to rely on, at some point or other, an appeal to intuitions (whatever you might think of Sommers’ positive view, his ability to interact with the relevant literature is genuinely impressive).

Having argued that in the free will and moral responsibility debates, intuitions are the ultimate bases for theories, Sommers then claims that there is significant cross-cultural disagreement about the conditions under which agents are morally responsible for their actions. In defense of this claim, Sommers isn’t shy about digging into the relevant sociological and anthropological literatures. In fact, in Chapter 2 (“Moral Responsibility and the Culture of Honor”), Chapter 3 (“Same Cultures, Collectivist Societies, Original Sin, and Pharaoh’s Hardened Heart”), and Chapter 4 (“Can the Variation Be Explained Away?”) Sommers demonstrates that different cultures have significantly different intuitions about when it is that blame and punishment are appropriate. These chapters, especially Chapters 2 and 3, were successful exercises in bringing empirical studies to bear on the philosophical argument itself.

Of course, the facts that philosophers have relied on intuitions and that there is widespread disagreement do not entail the truth of metaskepticism. For that, Sommers needs a third claim—namely, that we have no neutral basis for favoring (only) our intuitions and discounting (all) the contrary intuitions

of others. This is true within the debates themselves (incompatibilists have no reason to favor their own intuitions over those of the compatibilist, and vice versa), and it's also true in the broader culture. In other words, in light of intractable disagreement, Westerners have no reason to favor their intuitions about the conditions under which agents are responsible over the intuitions of shame, honor, or collectivist cultures (at least when it comes to constructing a universalist theory of moral responsibility). From this, then, Sommers concludes that metaskepticism is true.

In Part II of *Relative Justice*, Sommers takes the truth of metaskepticism for granted, and proceeds to explore its implications. In Chapter 5 ("Where Do We Go from Here?"), Sommers distinguishes between metaskepticism and first-order skepticism, variantism, and revisionism about moral responsibility. In Chapter 6 ("A Metaskeptical Analysis of Libertarianism and Compatibilism") Sommers argues that even for those of us who are members of the same "intuition group," there are powerful reasons to reject both libertarianism and compatibilism as adequate analyses of our suitably relativized concepts of free will and moral responsibility. Finally, in Chapter 7 ("A Very Tentative Metaskeptical Endorsement of Elimativism about Moral Responsibility"), Sommers motivates a first-order eliminativism about moral responsibility that is compatible with metaskepticism. Like Derk Pereboom's hard incompatibilism, Sommers' eliminativism about moral responsibility is "safe." Though our responsibility practices would be unjustified given the truth of eliminativism, Sommers assures us that our lives would still be worth living. But despite his forceful defense of eliminativism, Sommers concludes by saying "I end my analysis more confident than ever that there are other considered judgments about the conditions of moral responsibility that are just as reasonable as my own" (p. 202).

Sommers' modesty on this point is refreshing, but it's hardly the only refreshing thing about *Relative Justice*. Unlike a great deal of the literature on free will and moral responsibility, which is narrowly focused on first-order questions concerning the conditions in which agents act freely and responsibly, Sommers is admirably sensitive to metaethical and to general methodological considerations. He also resists the somewhat imperialist tendencies found in much of the Anglo-American philosophical tradition.

However, it was somewhat surprising to me that Sommers doesn't address extant theories of moral responsibility that, like his brand of eliminativism, lack universalist pretensions. For example, John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza's theory of moral responsibility, which is one of the most influential theories to date, is explicit in its limited scope: "we shall be trying to articulate the

inchoate, shared views about moral responsibility in (roughly speaking) a modern, Western democratic society" (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, p. 10). Presumably such theories would be compatible with Sommers' metaskepticism, and so immune from the sorts of objections he levels at universalist theories in Part I. Thus, it would have been instructive if Sommers had directly argued against these methodologically sound alternatives.

In addition to this, I also have another concern about Sommers' overall argument. Here is Sommers' characterization of the argument for metaskepticism:

I [present] evidence that there are significant differences in intuitions about moral responsibility across cultures, and that at least some of these differences are not resolvable by rational argument or philosophical analysis. Since theories of moral responsibility ultimately stand or fall according to their intuitive plausibility, I conclude that there is no set of conditions for moral responsibility that applies universally, and therefore that no theory of moral responsibility is objectively correct (p. 5).

As it stands, this argument underdetermines the truth of metaskepticism. After all, irresolvable disagreement itself doesn't entail that there is no objective fact of the matter. So for all the evidence Sommers marshals against universalism, it seems to me that he hasn't actually shown that "there is no set of conditions for moral responsibility that applies universally." At most, he has shown that, given irresolvable disagreements in intuitions, we are not warranted in believing that this or that theory of the conditions of moral responsibility applies universally. However, this is consistent with some set of conditions applying universally. So to get the full metaskeptical conclusion, it would seem that Sommers would need a further premise that the best explanation for the disagreement is that there is no objective fact of the matter. And it's not clear to me that universalists, who are likely to metaethical realists or constructivists, would be forced to accept this further premise.

Of course, even for those who ultimately reject Sommers' metaskeptical conclusions, his book is still worth the time. Not only is it well written and researched, it is wide-ranging, and it explores (though lamentably too quickly in places) issues that theorists working on free will and moral responsibility need to give serious attention to. For example, Sommers is surely right that we need to give more care to the role that intuitions, perhaps idiosyncratic ones, play in our theories. We should also be more transparent about whether our theories are realist, constructivist, fictionalist, etc., since our metaethical assumptions have important implications for first-order theorizing. And we

also need to be more sensitive to other perspectives, both within our “intuition group” and without. That Sommers’ *Relative Justice* pushes us in these directions is undoubtedly admirable.

*D. Justin Coates*  
University of Houston  
*djcoates@uh.edu*