

MARIUS BAUMANN
THE UNDERDETERMINATION OF MORAL THEORIES

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BOOK REVIEW

The Underdetermination of Moral Theories (2025) is a compelling monograph by Marius Baumann, offering a well-structured, systematic, and articulate inquiry into the idea of whether our main normative moral theories can be said to exhibit a phenomenon previously described in discussions about theories in philosophy of natural sciences – namely, the underdetermination of theory by evidence; it subsequently explores how do the normative ethical theories fare with the consequences of such problem and what it implies on the meta-ethical level.

Baumann is a postdoc researcher currently working in David Enoch's project "Liberalism rekindled" and a habilitation candidate at LMU Munich. He published several articles about moral underdetermination, merit, and liberalism in high-ranking journals. The book reviewed here is his 236-page monograph debut, published in March 2025 by Cambridge University Press, available in open-access on the publisher's website.

This monograph rests on and supports the claim that there is a sound and useful structural analogy to be made between scientific theories and normative moral theories with respect to them being underdetermined by evidence, moral judgments, and moral intuitions, respectively. The main theoretical issue at hand is that the same set of empirical data is equally well explained by multiple mutually incompatible theoretical accounts. The epistemological problems about the further choice of one said theory are discussed in philosophy of science from the beginning of the 20th century; however, the suggestion that there is an analogous problem for moral theories being underdetermined by moral judgments and intuitions seems to be underexplored, according to Baumann.

In the following paragraphs, I shall briefly introduce the main themes of the topic itself with the structure of the reviewed book in mind, so that the subsequent concise summary of each chapter of the book is easier to understand.

The underdetermination of a theory by evidence is a problem because it threatens the more or less dominant realist views in philosophy of science and meta-ethics, according to which a successful theory is a description or a model of factual and independent reality. Underdetermination suggests that evidence itself is inconclusive as to which equally plausible theory we rationally

ought to choose, hence either undermining our notion of epistemic accessibility of the “outside reality” or, less controversially, challenging us to articulate meta-theoretical non-evidential criteria according to which we ought to choose the respective theory.

The application of the problem of underdetermination to moral theories rests on several assumptions: firstly, that moral judgements and moral intuitions are structurally analogous for normative ethical theories to empirical evidence in scientific enquiry, and secondly, that the main functions of moral theories and scientific theories are sufficiently alike (e.g., that they explain the available evidence, they account for judgements and intuitions about particular cases, they give account of the reasons why we ought to accept propositions of a certain scientific theory or propositions with certain deontic content etc.).

One way we may think about resolving the problem of underdetermination is to develop a project of unification of the theories that will account for their previous incompatibilities and will explain the available data in an at least equally satisfactory manner as each of the competing theories. Baumann noticed that there are at least three projects with the aim of unifying normative moral theories, but their authors hadn’t conceived of them in terms of the underdetermination problem.

Another way of dealing with the problem of underdetermination is to develop an anti-realist metaphysics of scientific and moral theories. This option was chosen by Bas van Fraassen in his *constructive empiricism* about scientific theories, and Marius Baumann in the structurally analogous *constructive deonticism* about normative moral theories, as presented in this publication.

The book is divided into three parts and a total of eight chapters. The first part introduces the topic of underdetermination as historically conceived in philosophy of science. It compares the accounts of Pierre Duhem (1906) and Willard V. O. Quine (1951), concluding that the underdetermination problem is a multifaceted issue that cannot be simply accounted for in a singular so-called *Duhem-Quine thesis*. There, however, is a basic structure to various versions that the underdetermination thesis can take.

Baumann sketches the main paths by which we can come to the underdetermination thesis, namely *the inductive strategy* (what Duhem undertook) by noticing patterns in the history of a given scientific field, *the holistic strategy* (what Duhem also accepted but was most notably developed by Quine) noting that the proponents of verificationist holism have typically supported some sense of underdetermination, and lastly *the algorithmic strategy* developed by André Kukla.

He then notes that the following parameters of underdetermination ought to be specified if we are to treat the problem systematically and apply it elsewhere: *scope* (how many alternatives are there for how many theories), *locality* (whether underdetermination is an issue of a specific scientific field or does it concern the totality of our scientific worldview), *temporality* (whether the underdetermination follows just from our present data or is it a matter of all present and future data), *strength of the theory-evidence connection* (whether the theory deductively entails its evidence claims or do we take some broader sense of support).

Baumann subsequently makes the case that an analogous problem can be discovered in normative ethics. He does so by deeming the main structure and functions of moral theories sufficiently alike scientific ones. Two disanalogous spots are discussed – namely, Rawls’ *mid- to high-level*

intuitions about general principles (which seem to equip the ethicist with a tool that the scientist lacks), and *the theory-ladenness of evidence* (that our evidence for ethical theories is already contaminated by them).

The second part then proceeds with the inquiry of the underdetermination problem for deontology, consequentialism, and contractualism; it also argues that the framing of this topic as an underdetermination problem is a more fruitful one compared to projects with the aims of unifying normative ethics, such as Derek Parfit's *Triple Theory*, the so-called *consequentializing deontologists*, and the so-called *deontologizing consequentialists* in this order. Baumann discusses different strategies by the aforementioned authors and concludes this part with a big picture view of normative ethical unification strategies on the grounds of his structural treatment of the underdetermination problem.

The third part then leaves the matters of normative ethics and turns to the meta-ethical implications of the underdetermination approach. It answers the question of whether the skeptical conclusion of the underdetermination thesis, stating that our extensionally equivalent yet theoretically incompatible accounts of the world threaten our justification that the chosen theory is true, is applicable in the meta-ethical domain.

Finally, the last chapters of the third part argue for a novel meta-ethical theory, *constructive deonticism* (structurally analogous to Bas van Fraassen's *constructive empiricism*) as a reaction to the skeptical challenge, and situate it in the broader context of other meta-ethical theories. Baumann also revisits and strengthens his claims about various topics touched on in the previous chapters, e.g., the concept of moral explanation or theoretical virtue in ethics. The book concludes with two hypotheses about how normative ethics ended up having the underdetermination problem, and further argues the superiority of the aforementioned framing.

In conclusion, *The Underdetermination of Moral Theories* offers a novel application and framing of an underexplored issue in moral theory. It systematically and clearly guides the reader through a well-structured and logical presentation of the topic and thinks through the implications of explored claims with careful and comprehensible argumentation. Some readers might feel that the last part of the book – the construction of a novel meta-ethical theory and the sketch of the argumentational landscape situating it in the context of contemporary analytical meta-ethics – has been given slightly too little attention. However, given the focus and aims of the book and the context of the last chapter, I believe that such a task is fine to be kept for another monograph.



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