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From the Selected Works of Audrey L Anton

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Review: Moral Psychology: Historical and Contemporary Readings

Audrey L Anton



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Moral Psychology: Historical and Contemporary Readings is a much-needed collection of essays on issues of moral psychology. The aim of the book is to present the reader with a comprehensive view of both the history and foundations of moral psychology as well as the discipline's position in academia and its relationship with other disciplines, such as psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology, all of which involve empirical investigation of human capabilities and behavior. This collection is well organized into five distinct parts. Each part has a helpful editorial introduction that not only summarizes the main themes of the debate assigned to that part, but also provides brief summaries of each of the subsequent essays in that section. The selected papers are presented in chronological order, thus illustrating the development of the debate. First, an historical piece of philosophy is presented to demonstrate the original questions of the section's theme. The historical pieces are followed by more-recent articles or selections written by scientists concerning similar topics. Finally, each part concludes with articles written by contemporary moral psychologists. These final articles often make mention of the historical texts or the scientific articles preceding those papers. This dialectic style of presentation successfully gives the reader the context and progression of the debate while still highlighting the "live" questions that are, in a sense, left as an exercise for the reader as well as future academics.

This collection of readings is suitable for an upper-level undergraduate philosophy course or a survey-style graduate class. Though the collection can be used as a textbook, it is organized and presented in such a comprehensive way that the average educated reader of any ilk could both enjoy and benefit from an independent study of the readings.

The first part, *Reason & Passion*, addresses questions regarding the psychological foundations of moral judgment. This part addresses questions such as: *From what aspect of our consciousness do moral judgments come? What effect, if any, do other faculties of mind have on our moral judgments? and How do our moral judgments and the relevant cognitive faculties affect individual actions?* The section begins with the historical writings of Samuel Clarke, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. These are followed by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's rationalist account of moral development and R. James Blair's analysis of moral judgment in light of psychopathic reasoning and behavior. Michael Smith and Shaun Nichols contribute contemporary philosophy pieces. Smith's selections from his book *The Moral Problem*, endorse a rationalist view of moral judgment. Nichols argues against moral rationalism by drawing on modern research on psychopathy, including the evidence presented in Blair's paper (included among the readings of this part).

The second part, *Altruism & Egoism*, considers whether humans are naturally egoistic and, if they are not, how altruistic behavior is possible. The section seeks to consider what evolutionary and psychological processes might be responsible for the answers to these questions. This part opens with historical readings from Plato, Thomas Hobbes, Joseph Butler, and Francis Hutcheson. These historical readings are followed by a paper explaining the results from several experiments conducted by social psychologist Daniel Batson. Next, a piece by anthropologist Robert Trivers defends the view of reciprocal altruism, which holds that natural selection favors a certain kind of altruistic behavior. The final essay in this section is by psychologist Barry Schwartz. Schwartz argues that assumptions of egoism create bias in how psychologists interpret the behavior of subjects in experiments. In addition, he believes that an assumption of egoism is a self-fulfilling prophecy in that the belief that humans are, by nature, egoistic inspires the acceptance of egoistic motives and behavior. The contemporary philosophy paper in this section is by Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson. They distinguish two types of altruism that they feel are being considered in both the philosophical and scientific research: evolutionary altruism and psychological altruism. They argue that both types of altruism are probably products of evolution, specifically group selection.

Part three, *Virtue & Character*, considers the central claim of virtue ethics (that development of a good character that enables one to behave consistently in multiple types of situations is essential to morality) in light of the central claim of situationism (that all human beings will act similarly if placed in similar circumstances). Historical readings in this section are limited to one by Plato and one by Aristotle. The scientific pieces include Stanley Milgram's work on obedience to authority and selections from *The Person and the Situation*, by Psychologists Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett. Ross and Nisbett's paper provides a sketch of the history of situationism, which they ultimately endorse. They refer to evidence such as "the bystander intervention effect" and "The Good Samaritan Study," which indicate that one's willingness to assist another in need is affected by the number of others present and capable of doing the same as well as whether the individual in question is in a hurry. This section concludes with three papers by contemporary philosophers. John M. Doris challenges the efficacy of virtue ethics' instruction to imagine what a virtuous person would do in a given situation. Instead, he endorses a strategy of being aware of one's situational influences coupled with a humble acceptance of the instability of character. Rachana Kamtekar defends virtue ethics, arguing that it does indeed have the resources to dispel worries stemming from situational research. First, she challenges the view of virtue ethics that situationists

have, arguing that it is inaccurate. Second, she argues that the correct view of virtue ethics cannot be confirmed or denied by the types of experiments contemporary research has conducted. Finally, Maria Merritt offers a Humean conception of virtue ethics that is more amenable to situationism than other types in that her version encourages the intentional development of dependable social relationships and external conditions conducive to virtuous behavior.

The fourth part of this collection includes essays on issues of Agency & Responsibility. Historical philosophers represented include Aristotle, Thomas Reid, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The scientific pieces begin with selections from psychologist B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Skinner argues that a person's behavior is caused by patterns of reinforcement of certain behaviors involving external environmental stimuli. He denounces the idea that human behavior can be freely initiated from internal mental states or character traits. Psychologists Daniel Wegner and Thalia Wheatley contribute a piece that draws evidence from psychological studies in order to motivate the idea that our subjective experience that we consciously and intentionally cause our own free actions is illusory. They make this claim on the basis of evaluating evidence that they think suggests that non-conscious processes cause both our actions and this experience that we consciously cause our own actions. Philosopher Eddy Nahmias contributes a piece critiquing Wegner's interpretation of the evidence in both the article in this volume as well as other works published by Wegner. Nahmias argues that Wegner's description of the experience of conscious will involves conditions that are neither sufficient nor necessary. Then, he adds that the type of evidence investigated by Wegner is the wrong type to prove his conclusions since it does not take into account the formation of distal intentions to act and voluntary yet habitual patterns of behavior. In similar spirit to Nahmias' article, psychologist Roy Baumeister argues that psychologists are not capable of settling debates on the conceptual aspects of free will, but that they are capable of investigating how the natural mental acts of deliberation, choice, and self-control manifest in subjects. For instance, Baumeister points to cognitive psychology research that suggests that all such mental activities draw from the same limited source of energy, and that challenging mental activities are often followed by weaker displays of willpower regarding temptations such as overeating. For Baumeister, this does not conclusively prove anything about whether or not we have free will; it only suggests that the exercising of willpower can be subject to depleted energy supplies. Finally, philosopher Alfred Mele contributes a paper analyzing the legitimacy of claims made by psychologists such as Daniel Wegner and Benjamin Libet. Mele points out that neither psychologist isolates distinct types of mental states, such as mere urges (which may or may not be carried out) and intentions. Similarly to Nahmias, Mele contends that the negligence to generalize data and findings, such as focusing only on immediate intentions and neglecting distal ones, limits the scope of the conclusions that can be legitimately drawn from the research.

The fifth and final part, *Moral Intuitions*, addresses both the philosophical thought experiments often used to determine which of several competing moral theories or moral judgments we tend to accept in light of possible psychological explanations for the causes of such intuitions. Historical figures surveyed in this section include Henry Sidgwick and W. D. Ross. These are followed by several pieces by contemporary philosophers. First, Judith Jarvis Thomson presents several versions of the "trolley problem." Some descriptions of the problem tend to elicit responses that the proposed course of action is permissible while other descriptions of what is supposed to be, morally speaking, the same moral dilemma elicit the opposite intuition. Thomson points out that a small yet significant difference in the cases might explain this asymmetry: in the one, we are permitted to do something that has a side-effect of causing the death of an innocent person, whereas in the other we are not permitted to take a course of action that would entail causing the death of an innocent intentionally as a means to an end. The subsequent article, written by philosopher Peter Unger, challenges the very idea of identifying such a difference as the justificatory explanation for our competing intuitions. Indeed, he argues that it might be the case that our intuitions in the one type of case are grounded in morally salient facts of the case whereas our intuitions concerning the other scenario are fueled by something morally *irrelevant*, such as personal proximity to a victim, strong selfish motives, etc. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt challenges these claims. Haidt argues that immediate, unreflective moral intuitions are the basis for our moral judgment, and that moral reasoning is used in order to influence the moral judgments of others. Still, Haidt is satisfied with this idea of the origin of our moral judgments and sees no reason to find them suspect. Psychologist and philosopher, Joshua Greene, attempts to settle this dispute between Unger and Haidt by observing the cognitive processes as recorded by an fMRI machine regarding pairs of asymmetrical thought experiments. Greene found that most subjects' responses to the first case (that it is permissible to allow one person to die in order to save five) generated noticeable activity in parts of the brain known for "higher order" cognition. However, the majority of subjects' responses to the first case (that it is not permissible to kill someone as a means to saving five others) elicit activity in the parts of the brain thought to deal with emotion. Greene interprets these findings as suggestive that the first intuition is justified whereas the second is more of a brute emotional response. He further argues that the first type of response is indicative of consequentialist reasoning and that the second is indicative of deontology. Finally, he contends that consequentialism is the correct moral theory since it can be connected to the more reflective cognitive activities of

the brain. The final essay of this section (and the collection) is by philosopher Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. Sinnott-Armstrong reports that subject's responses to such pairs of thought experiments tend to depend on the order in which they are presented. Such facts suggest to Sinnott-Armstrong that our moral intuitions ought not to be relied upon as the sole justifications for our moral judgments. Instead, he maintains that justified moral beliefs will be inferred by other justified beliefs (contra intuitionists). Therefore, concludes Sinnott-Armstrong, much more work in psychological research needs to be done before we can know more about the justification of our moral judgments.

As mentioned at the outset of this review, *Moral Psychology: Historical and Contemporary Readings* is, overall, a successful project that will prove to serve both philosophers and interested scholars of other disciplines well. I have few criticisms of this collection. Perhaps the most noticeable concern is the representation of historical philosophers. While the figures and selections of their works are all relevant to the issues at hand, they are biased against the medieval period of philosophy. Philosophers from the Ancient and Modern periods are represented; yet there is a 1,908-year gap between the death of the oldest Ancient philosopher (322 B.C.E.) and the birth of the youngest Modern philosopher (1588 C.E.). Negligence of figures in this period is not justified, since many Hellenistic and Medieval philosophers wrote on the exact issues featured in the five thematic parts. For instance, Epicurus, Seneca, Epictetus, Anselm, Augustine, Aquinas, John Duns Scotus and Ockham all had substantial writings dedicated to agency and free will (part four). Augustine, Aquinas, and Abelard wrote extensively on the relationship between reason and passion in regard to moral action (part one). Virtue and character have an entirely different presentation by many philosophers in this period, such as Saadia Gaon, Avicenna, Bahya ibn Pakuda, Aquinas, and Maimonides (part three). To the editors' credit, it is not possible to include all relevant texts in one such volume. Be that as it may, some philosophers enjoy multiple showings (e.g., Plato (2), Aristotle (2), Francis Hutcheson (3)); any of these readings may have been swapped out with something from the medieval period in the spirit of diversity of historical philosophical texts. This brings me to my second criticism, which is not as substantial. By limiting the scope of *moral psychology* to that pertaining to empirical investigation, the editors of this volume are not responsible for including writings and arguments from moral psychologists whose arguments focus more on conceptual analysis of the terms at issue or metaphysical claims. For example, contemporary free will theorists such as Harry Frankfurt, John Martin Fischer, Derk Pereboom, and Timothy O'Connor are absent from this volume since most of their arguments are related to metaphysical or conceptual issues. Arguably, these theorists are also moral psychologists, since a charitably broad definition of the term *moral psychology* would describe the field of study simply as the intersection between ethics, psychology, and philosophy of mind, and these theorists have written extensively on moral responsibility and agency. Therefore, the narrow scope of this book might lead the student of moral psychology to believe that such philosophers are working on "something else," since their topics and arguments are not as easily affected by empirical findings.

Despite these two criticisms, my overall verdict is unequivocally positive. By including works by various kinds of scientists on empirically based studies, the editors of this volume are answering the long-time complaint that philosophy is done "from the armchair" and wrongfully ignores the findings of other disciplines. Still, the editors rightfully do not go so far as to dismiss philosophy's appropriate role in these discussions. For example, articles such as those contributed by Eddy Nahmias and Alfred R. Mele in section five challenge scientists' interpretations of their own findings. Philosophers often complain that the evidence provided by various scientists does not support the conclusions that are drawn from it. This collection of essays makes it clear that part of moral psychology's job is to hold researchers accountable for attending to rigorous conceptual inquiry and valid inference-making when reporting to the public that they have "discovered" that we are not free, or are fundamentally egoistic, or several other such claims that have been irresponsibly reported based on interesting, yet insufficient evidence. This collection successfully illustrates the need for scientists and philosophers to work together on such projects in effort to reach the truth via a thorough inquiry. In that regard, I would recommend this text very strongly.

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