AMORAL THOUGHTS ABOUT MORALITY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Howard H. Kendler's career has been varied and distinguished. He received his B.A. from Brooklyn College and his M.A. and Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Iowa. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and was the Chief Clinical Psychologist at Walter Reed General Hospital. From 1946 to 1948 he was an assistant professor at the University of Colorado and from 1948 to 1963 he was associated with New York University, where in 1951 he became Professor of Psychology and Chair of the Department of Psychology of University College. Since 1963 he has been Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Dr. Kendler has been a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences as well as Visiting Professor at the University of California, Berkeley; Hebrew University in Jerusalem; and Tel-Aviv University. He is the author of *Basic Psychology, Psychology: A Science in Conflict, Historical Foundations of Modern Psychology,* co-editor of *Essays in Neobehaviorism: A Memorial Volume to Kenneth W. Spence,* and has written more than 150 professional articles. In addition to serving as consultant to governmental agencies, Dr. Kendler has held the office of President of the Western Psychological Association, Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Psychonomic Society, and President of the Division of General Psychology and Division of Experimental Psychology of the American Psychological Association. He is also a member of the Society of Experimental Psychologists.

Second Edition

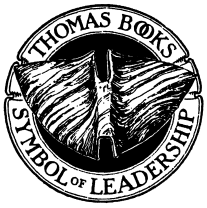
AMORAL THOUGHTS ABOUT MORALITY

The Intersection of Science, Psychology, and Ethics

By

HOWARD H. KENDLER

University of California, Santa Barbara



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Dedicated to my grandchildren: Jenny, Seth, and Nathan

REMEMBER!

PREFACE

The purpose of *Amoral Thoughts About Morality* has not changed in its second edition. Consequently, the original preface is still appropriate. However, there are two important additions that can be briefly described. One is the updating of empirical evidence and theoretical development occurring during the recent past. The second is an attempt to extend the analysis of the relationship between scientific facts and moral principles beyond the boundaries of a democratic society for which it was originally designed. By examining the differences between experimental and historical analyses, an attempt is made to clarify the nature of the conflict between political democracies and Islamic societies and identify potential sources of reconciliation and persistent conflict.

My great indebtedness to those mentioned at the end of the Preface to the First Edition still remains. The preparation of the second edition profited from an illuminating correspondence with Gerald Zuriff, the helpful editorial assistance of Karen Aldenderfer, and the counsel and support of Madeline Hanrahan.

H.H.K.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Since the birth of psychology as an independent discipline in 1879, controversy has raged as to whether it is a prescriptive or descriptive science. Can psychology advocate moral principles and prescribe public policies (e.g., bilingual education, affirmative action, pro-abortion) or is psychological knowledge value-free, lacking any logical implications for moral principles or public policies? Perhaps more importantly, can psychology, without endorsing any moral position or public policy, provide reliable information about the consequences of competing policies so that informed decisions can be made about which policy best serves the needs of society.

The debate about the prescriptive or descriptive status of psychology has remained unresolved, partly because the conflict has rarely been analyzed by examining the epistemological basis of the relationship between psychological evidence and moral principles. Consequently, when psychology is required to address moral issues, particularly in the realm of public policy, the profession speaks with conflicting voices. Some psychologists presume that they can identify public policies that are right, good, and just. Others consider such moral judgments to be inconsistent with the ethics of science that demand empirical facts be reported without any moral implications or spin. Others, probably the majority of psychologists, have ignored the issue, or refuse to deal with it.

The controversy about facts and values cannot be resolved because it reflects conflicting conceptions of both science and psychology. My aim is to bring the problems into sharp focus by clarifying the issues so that psychologists and their professional organizations can better appreciate the consequences of their views, for the benefit of both the discipline and a democratic society. To achieve my goal, the relationship between facts and values will initially be analyzed in the abstract

and then the resulting epistemological framework will be applied to controversial issues such as genetic and environmental influences on behavior, the concept of racial superiority, affirmative action, and multiculturalism. The general analysis brings to the surface underlying ethical, legal, and scientific problems that have tended to be ignored by those social scientists who believe that empirical data, or what are regarded as such, can logically validate public policies. The book will touch upon many emotional problems that generate social strife. The hope, as well as the expectation, is that exposing these sensitive issues to critical examination will help more than harm a moral pluralistic society.

Although the views expressed are my own, I must acknowledge my indebtedness to John Dewey, Karl Popper, Imré Lakatos, Ernest Nagel, and Isaiah Berlin for shaping them. I wish to thank Tracy S. Kendler, Bob Silverman, Tom Bouchard, and Brewster Smith for their contributions to my book.

H.H.K.

CONTENTS

Page

Preface vii

Chapter

1. SCIENCE, PSYCHOLOGY, AND PUBLIC POLICY 3
   - The Meanings of Truth 4
     - Forms of Understanding 5
     - The Consequences of Scientific Understanding 7
     - The Relationship between Psychology and Public Policy 8
     - Natural Science Methodology 8
       - Observational Purity 10
       - Scientific "Truth" 14
       - The Boundary between Science and Nonscience 16
   - Psychology 19
     - Natural Science Psychology 20
     - Psychology: A Human Science 23
   - Facts and Values 26
     - Nature's Search for Human Values 27
     - Psychology's Efforts to Bridge the Fact/Value Gap 31

2. INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DIFFERENCES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL ABILITIES 42
   - Egalitariansim and Elitism 43
   - Aptitude Tests 44
     - Intelligence Testing 47
       - Criticisms of Intelligence Tests 51
   - The Character of Intelligence Test Scores (IQ) 56
     - Ideology and the Nature-Nurture Controversy 61
     - Nature and Nurture in Psychology 62

The Interdependence of Heredity and Environment 63
Environmental Determinism versus Genetic Interactionism 65
Progressive and Degenerating Research Programs 68

3. IDEOLOGY AND IQ 76
The Burt Affair 77
The Role of Science in Society 79
Boosting IQ 83
The Persistence of a Radical Environmentalism 86
Ethical Implications of Genetic Influences on Intelligence 89

4. RACIAL DIFFERENCES: FACTS AND SPECULATIONS 95
Race, Intelligence, and Social Policy 95
Race 95
Intelligence 98
Social Policy 99
Racial Differences in Intelligence Test Scores: Possible or Impossible? 100
Black/White Differences in Intelligence 106
Facts and Speculations 107
Evaluation of Criticisms 109
Racial Superiority: Empirical Concept or Value Judgment . . . 114
Policy Implications of Racial Differences in IQ Scores 116

5. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION: COMMON GROUND OR ETERNAL CONFLICT? 119
Affirmative Action and the Law 120
Constitutional Cases and Civil Rights Laws 121
Affirmative Action: Past and Present 125
School Desegregation 126
Affirmative Action and Social Discrimination 130
A Scientific-Psychological Analysis of Affirmative Action . . . 132
Basic Methodological Problems 132
The Meaning of Affirmative Action 133
The Consequences of Affirmative Action 133
Psychological Research on Affirmative Action 136
The Moral Justification of Affirmative Action 141

A Summary: A Blueprint for a Scientific-Psychological Appraisal 142
Preferential Treatment is the Core Social Issue in Affirmative Action 142
Consequences of Preferential Treatment in Medical School Education 143
Some Final Reflections on Preferential Treatment 156

6. MULTICULTURALISM: EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION? 161
A Eurocentric View of American Culture 161
A Multicultural View of American Culture 164
A Eurocentrist's Rejoinder 165
A Multiculturalist's Rejoinder 166
Sources of Conflict 167
Cultural Diversity 167
Educational Policy 168
The Psychology of Multiculturalism 171
Educational Diversity versus Academic Excellence 174
Cultural Equality: What Does It Mean? 177
Eurocentric versus Multicultural Society: Consequences . . 179
Social Unity 180
Economic Productivity 183
A Final Comment 189

7. FINAL THOUGHTS 190
The Social Value of Science 190
Antiscience 192
Antiscientism 195
Scientific Integrity 198
Elevating the Quality of Research 201
Accurate Reporting of Socially Relevant Research 201
Natural Science Psychology and Society 202
Moral Pluralism 205
Moral Pluralism: Problems and Solutions 207
Social Harmony and Moral Diversity 208
International Relations 215
The Conflict between Political Democracies and Militant Islam 216

The Future 221
Turkey 226
Final Comments 228
The 15 Commandments 231

References 233
Name Index 245
Subject Index 251

AMORAL THOUGHTS ABOUT MORALITY

Chapter 1

SCIENCE, PSYCHOLOGY, AND PUBLIC POLICY

The study of ethics is concerned with human values and moral conduct; what is good and bad and right and wrong. Science is a method that collects data through observations and experiments and offers systematic interpretations of the results. Psychology is the science of the mind and behavior. The three–ethics, science, psychology–obviously interact but in a manner that is far from clear. The reason for this ambiguity is that much more must be known about ethics, science, and psychology to understand their reciprocal interactions. As of now one would be hard-pressed to answer the following questions. Can science determine a moral truth such as abortion is *wrong* or affirmative action is *right?* Does the scientific method employed in physics, chemistry, and biology consist of an exact set of rules, for example the games of chess and checkers? Can psychology be a science in the same way as physics and biology? Are there different kinds of sciences? Can science, psychology, and ethics in combination assist a democracy in formulating and judging the effectiveness of public policies?

This book is focused on the last question. To answer this query, however, demands responding to the prior questions. Only by realizing that ethics, science, and psychology can be interpreted in a variety of ways does it become possible to isolate those aspects of each discipline that in combination can become a tool for effective policy choices. But this project cannot be accomplished swiftly or easily. A few more definitions accompanied by a quickie discussion will not be sufficient! What is required is a carefully constructed epistemological edifice that will reveal how a particular intersection of science, psychology, and ethics can assist a democracy in coping effectively with public policy

conflicts. And when this structure is constructed we will be in the position to analyze perceptively a few of the major social problems confronting American society.

Underlying all public policy clashes are moral conflicts. There are times that the very survival of a society depends on its ability to resolve, or at least ameliorate, the divisive, and sometimes destructive, consequences of ethical conflicts. Currently, the daily newspaper is rarely without stories about painful national clashes such as the morality of abortion, affirmative action, socioeconomic inequality, religious and ethnic conflicts, racial differences, gender clashes, sexual harassment, and homosexual marriage. Typically such policy clashes are fought in the political arena where the aim of the participants is usually to win the public debate by hook or crook. Instead of clarifying the basic issues at stake, confusion is encouraged in an effort to gain political advantage. Some would argue that misinformation is an inevitable consequence of the political process; a price that democracy must pay. But the price can be reduced if reliable information becomes available about the consequences of competing social policies. With such knowledge democratic processes can yield educated choices instead of uninformed decisions.

Can one really distinguish between *misinformation* and *accurate information* in the world of politics? Is it possible, in an era when the concept of *objective truth* is being challenged, to distinguish between *truth* and *falsity?* Yes, but the task is not easy. To be successful one must know what truth is and how it can be attained.

THE MEANINGS OF TRUTH

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), the great Dutch philosopher who encouraged a life of reason, not passion, suggested "He who would distinguish the true from the false must have an adequate idea of what is true and false." History tells us clearly "an adequate idea" can take many different forms. To make sense of the various kinds of truth that are possible, a distinction between understanding as a psychological process and explanation as an epistemological standard will prove helpful. Understanding is a psychological phenomenon that refers to the personal criteria "truth seekers" use when they report they "understand." Explanation, in contrast, requires a social criterion consisting

of explicit epistemological rules that must be met in order for a person to achieve understanding. Understanding is personal, explanation is social, and in a fundamental sense they are separable. The difference is illustrated in the case of the paranoid who understands that he or she is a victim of persecution in the absence of a socially acceptable explanation. In essence, understanding is based upon a radical subjectivity while explanation reflects a social reality.

The justification for the distinction between understanding and explanation is that it shifts attention away from the quixotic search for the true definition of truth to the reasonable task of characterizing different kinds of truth that people employ when interpreting their world. By recognizing that people can conceive truth in different ways, one then can evaluate the social consequences of the different criteria of truth while simultaneously avoiding entrapment in needless disputes about real or true truth.

Forms of Understanding

A tripartite division among three different forms of understanding–*intuitive, rational,* and *scientific*–can help clarify its meaning.

Intuitive: A common theme in the history of philosophy is that humans have a special mental faculty to ascertain truth. Human intuition enables one to grasp truth in an unpremeditated, noninferential manner. A prime example is the belief in God. His existence is intuitively true and no other reason is required. Henry Bergson (1859–1941), a philosopher, psychologist, and recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature, postulated a conflict between a life force (élan vital) and the world of matter. He acknowledged that the human intellect, operating within a scientific framework, is capable of understanding the physical world. Science, however, for Bergson is too restrictive for comprehending all human experience. Intuition, an evolutionary product of animal instincts, is needed to understand purely human events that range from the common to the mystical.

Rational: Rational simply means that understanding is achieved through reason. The existence of God can be supported by both rational and intuitive arguments. One common rational justification for God's existence is that some supernatural power is needed to create the universe and the human race. Rational understanding involves extended cognitive activity as contrasted with the instant flash of intu-