# 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 American Psychological Association. He is also a member of the Society of Experimental Psychologists.

Second Edition

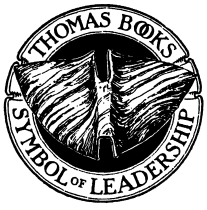
# AMORAL THOUGHTS ABOUT MORALITY

## The Intersection of Science, Psychology, and Ethics

*By*

**HOWARD H. KENDLER**

*University of California, Santa Barbara*




CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
*Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.*

*Published and Distributed Throughout the World by*

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62794-9265



ISBN 978-0-398-07791-4 (hard)
ISBN 978-0-398-07792-1 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2007037936

*With* THOMAS BOOKS *careful attention is given to all details of manufacturing and design. It is the Publisher's desire to present books that are satisfactory as to their physical qualities and artistic possibilities and appropriate for their particular use.* THOMAS BOOKS *will be true to those laws of quality that assure a good name and good will.*

*Printed in the United States of America*
*MM-R-3*

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Kendler, Howard H., 1919–
Amoral thoughts about morality : the intersection of science, psychology, and ethics / by Howard H. Kendler.–2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-398-07791-4 (hbk.)–ISBN 078-0-398-07792-1 (pbk.)
1. Psychology–Moral and ethical aspects. 2. Psychology, Applied–Moral and ethical aspects. 3. Psychology–Social aspects. 4. Psychology, Applied–Social aspects. I. Title.

BF76.4.K47 2008
174'.915–dc22 2007037936

*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

# 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-

itive comprehension. Another difference between the two is that one, intuitive, is private while in contrast a rational argument is public, subject to the scrutiny of others.

*Scientific.* Not only must scientific understanding meet a more demanding standard of rationality than does rational understanding, it also must be consistent with empirical evidence. Whereas rational understanding can justify the conclusion that the earth is flat, such a decision would be rejected by natural science because the mathematical analysis of empirical evidence indicates the shape of the earth approximates a globe. Rational within the context of rational understanding means a reasonable, coherent interpretation, not a mathematical proof. Supreme Court decisions are rarely unanimous but one cannot describe the majority opinion as rational and the contrasting minority opinion as irrational. The Constitution is not a logically organized document that offers a single answer to all legal questions. Instead, in the hands of Justices of the Supreme Court it can generate a wide variety of rational decisions, some that are mutually incompatible. Scientific disagreements occur, but over time they tend to be resolved by a combination of additional evidence and sharper logical analysis. The essential empirical component of science serves as the cutting edge that divides truth from falsehood. Intuitive and rational understandings fail to provide an equivalent rule that distinguishes truth from falsehood.

The classification of different forms of understanding carries a risk of possible misinterpretations. First, it must be emphasized that these three conceptions of understanding are not mutually exclusive, airtight categories that are sharply delineated from each other. Characteristics of one category can operate in another. Within science, intuitive and/or rational understanding can precede the formulation of a scientific explanation. Einstein confessed to knowing that his theory of relativity was correct before being able to demonstrate its scientific (empirical) justification (Wertheimer, 1945).

The major reason for identifying different forms of understanding is to emphasize the point that truth-seekers pursue different kinds of truth. What are the relative merits of the different forms of truth? Many natural scientists would suggest that only scientific truth is valuable because it alone can reveal the nature of reality. Such a position would be challenged by the old philosophical argument that the scientist's reality is an inference, not the "true reality." There is no way to

reach beyond our own observations and observe reality directly. For our purposes the metaphysical problems of the true nature of reality is best avoided. Empirical observations, not "reality," will serve as the foundation of our natural science orientation.

Even if one agrees that natural science methodology offers superior knowledge of the world that one intuitively believes exists, this admission of preeminence is limited, not general. Although science can offer impressive answers about the real world, it is inarticulate about questions that are basic to human existence: the meaning and purpose of life, what is a self-fulfilling life, does God exist, what is moral truth? Was the invasion of Iraq right or wrong? Science has no sense of taste when it comes to esthetics! Which is more beautiful: a Rembrandt, a Van Gogh, a Picasso or a Pollock? Neither does science have a moral sense when it comes to judging right from wrong–a proposition soon to be explained fully. Is abortion good or bad?

If our framework for judging contrasting form of understanding is shifted from the specific to the general, then the flaw in the reasoning that one form of comprehension is more valid than others should become obvious. If humans employ different criteria for understanding then the demonstration of the supremacy of one over the others requires a super criterion of true understanding that is independent of all three modes. Such a criterion is unavailable.

Thus the goal of true understanding, in the global sense, appears unachievable. Each form of understanding is "true" within its own context, and by implication wanting within the framework of other forms. We are left with the stark conclusion that there is no universal truth, but only limited truths that fit limited criteria. This conclusion has both a positive and negative consequence. It offers a variety of ways for the flexible human intellect to achieve understanding of the myriad events to which humans are exposed. At the same time it creates conflicting truths that have the potential, as the history of humankind vividly demonstrates, of one group forcefully imposing their truth on those who resist acceptance.

## The Consequences of Scientific Understanding

Science has been amazingly successful in providing empirical information and in answering theoretical questions about the nature of the world. Nevertheless, natural science methodology is limited in its abil-

ity to answer directly important questions about the human condition. In contrast, other modes of inquiry such as intuitive and rational understanding can answer questions that science is impotent to address, but such responses, it must be noted, fall far short of the level of agreement that natural science answers achieve.

The fact that competing modes of understanding cannot be judged in terms of any absolute value does not imply they are equally valuable. When it comes to understanding the world, science has been overwhelmingly effective in providing information that can be employed in such practical endeavors as enhancing health, increasing agricultural yields, providing improved shelter, disease control, facilitating communication and transportation, increasing longevity, exposing more people to great works of art, and so forth. At the same time scientific creations such as the atomic bomb, the internal combustion engine, mass-produced cigarettes, atomic waste, climate change, and others have raised the issue of whether so-called scientific progress is desirable. It would be difficult to deny that the natural science interpretation of the world has led to a mixed bag of consequences. How can these consequences be evaluated? An answer will be forthcoming by first reducing the size of the question to the relationship between psychology and public policy.

## The Relationship between Psychology and Public Policy

Can psychology contribute to the formulation and evaluation of public policy? If psychology can offer reliable information about the consequences of different social policies–abortion, bilingual education, preferential treatment in college admissions–then society would be able to make educated choices about competing programs. The capacity of psychology to provide such useful knowledge depends on its ability to employ the scientific method that has been successful in providing a deep understanding of physics, chemistry, and biology. To determine whether psychology can meet this epistemological demand requires some understanding of both natural science methodology and psychology.

## Natural Science Methodology

The common view is that the scientific method that generated Galileo's law of falling bodies, Newton's conception of gravity, Darwin's