

ETHICS, VALUES, AND RELIGION

Morality and Ethics in Theory and Practice, by Lewis R. Aiken. Springfield, Ill., Charles C Thomas, 2004, 288 pp., \$65.95; \$46.95 (paper).

Ethics is a topic of increasing salience in modern society. The multiplicity of theoretical perspectives and the diversity of practical ethical dilemmas in modern society make ethics a topic of increasing complexity as well.

Professor Aiken's text seeks to bring coherence to our understanding of moral aspects of 21st century life experience and clinical practice. The result is a unique and expansive text, which, unfortunately, does not have sufficient theoretical or empirical grounding to represent academically rigorous scholarship in the field. Many readers will nevertheless enjoy this book for its sheer breadth and eclecticism.

The first chapter of the two-part book covers the conceptual basis of ethics as informed by insights drawn from religion, behavioral science, and philosophy. The next chapter focuses on moral development, discussing a range of perspectives from psychoanalysis to Piaget and from the "Defining Issues Test" to the moral impact of different parenting styles. Subsequent chapters address differences in moral conduct of individuals and groups as reflected in social scientific data and key issues in education such as the "Character Education Manifesto" and fundamental values of academic integrity.

The second part of the book focuses on ethical issues, principles, and practices in different applied contexts. The chapters include bioethics, research ethics, business ethics, ethics in law and government, media ethics, sports and sexual ethics, and environmental ethics and international relations. Aiken treats a wide set of intriguing issues such as euthanasia, research misconduct, ethics and war, professionalism in the military, and "cyberethics."

The book reads like a long commentary rather than a formal analysis—Aiken freely offers his perspectives throughout the text. For example, in the chapter on moral education he states,

During the past few decades, violence, murder and suicide, precocious sexual behavior, and other immoral and illegal behaviors have continued without appreciable reduction among American children and adolescents. The decline in ethics and morality has, however, not gone unnoticed.

Assertions of this nature make the text interesting, provocative, and readable. Subsequent authors (building on this text) will want to develop the empirical and conceptual substantiation needed to support—or refute—Aiken's observations.

The glossary at the end of the book is extensive. For instance, Aiken provides a mix of definitions of colloquial terms ("cooking data" and "bait-and-switch"), scientific and clinical concepts ("inheritable genetic modification," "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder" and "ego ideal"), legal terms ("usury" and "antitrust legislation"), cross-cultural beliefs and

religious ideals ("Dukkha," "Jen," "Jihad," and "Diaspora"), as well as subtle philosophical concepts ("categorical imperative" and "deontology"). A strength of the book is special features such as visually accessible tables and the series of questions and URLs for web sites with further information at the end of each chapter.

In sum, this book is unusual for its ambitious scope and atypical style. The writing is very clear and readable, and the structure of the text is evident. Some readers may take issue with its editorial style and with Aiken's interpretation and application of the concepts he articulates. It is best viewed as a long, off-beat "treatise," as it is accurately described on the back cover. It is a document that challenges readers to think in a more eclectic and interdisciplinary manner, and it will leave them with greater awareness of just how much ethical issues influence us personally and professionally on a daily basis.

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Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification, by Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman. New York, American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, 2004, 800 pp., \$75.00.

Mainstream psychology is once again joining dynamic psychiatry and transpersonal psychology in the scientific study of character and its development. This book is the first progress report of the effort by positive psychologists to develop a "classification of the sanities." The authors provide a list of traits that can be studied in future work on well-being. However, an adequate positive psychology of character must show how *anyone* can learn to feel good, not just some people with *special* personality traits. Therefore, the development of a taxonomy of well-being requires consideration of character development within a comprehensive psychobiological model of personality, as is done elsewhere (1).

The present volume is largely composed of well-informed reviews of 24 personality traits that are called "character strengths" because each is asserted to be socially valued in its own right and also provides one of many alternative paths to virtue and well-being. Each trait is considered in a separate chapter along with psychometric evidence documenting its reliable measurement. Each trait is defined behaviorally and illustrated by a representative case. For example, being asked for advice by others is taken as a measure of a wise perspective, so the late advice-columnist Ann Landers is suggested as a paragon of wisdom. Not everyone will agree with such choices, but simple behavioral measures do bring concepts of virtue down to a practical level of everyday experience that is understood and approached by many people.

The focus on common behaviors facilitates reliable measurement and gives hope that many people are on the path to well-being. Such hope is limited, however, by the facts that not everyone has the strengths listed and that some putative strengths also have disadvantages. For example, curiosity (novelty seeking) can certainly have its disadvantages, such as greater risk of abuse of illegal substances. Their paragon of

curiosity is John Lilly, a psychologist notorious for substance abuse, as depicted in the movie *Altered States*.

Peterson and Seligman are more convincing in their challenge to the relativistic assumption that values depend largely on cultural conventions. They suggest that a small number of specific personality traits have been consistently valued as adaptive in all humans regardless of culture. Their important conclusion is supported by a review of virtues recognized in each of the great world cultures (China, India, Greece). For example, their list of six core virtues is a slight rearrangement of the seven virtues of the Christian tradition: temperance (e.g., modesty, self-control), justice (e.g., fairness, citizenship), courage (e.g., fortitude, bravery), practical wisdom, humanity (e.g., charity), and transcendence (e.g., hope, faith).

Peterson and Seligman are self-proclaimed agnostics who specifically deny any faith in the divine. To accommodate the prominent role of faith in the happy life, they recognize it as an alternative to hope on the path to their overarching concept of transcendence. However, empirical findings show that the character traits that measure faith, hope, and charity are all interdependent and synergistic in making a person feel good (1). This casts doubt on the agnostic view that hope and faith are simply alternative paths to well-being. When faced with adversity or death, we realize that the moral level of intellect and virtue recognized by agnostics is hard and incomplete—doomed to heroic struggle and despair, as acknowledged by Freud and Erikson. Without faith, hope and love cannot reach a transcendental level that is spontaneous and unconditional.

The major accomplishment of this book is in showing that empirically minded humanists can measure character strengths and virtues in a rigorous scientific manner. Peterson and Seligman are forthright in stating that their theoretical perspective has not been adequate to produce a taxonomy in which specific configurations of traits predict a person's level of well-being. Their materialistic worldview proves inadequate to provide a theoretical account of transcendental phenomena like creative gifts and the contemplative experiences that are the foundation for faith and spirituality (1).

Although Peterson and Seligman are agnostics, they have now observed in their own factor analytic work that spiritual faith is a major dimension of character independent of hopeful self-directedness and charitable cooperativeness. Their finding confirms earlier psychometric work showing that spirituality is an important dimension of character that contributes to well-being (1–3). I hope that the authors' integrity and open-minded humility will serve as an inspiration for other empirically minded humanists to evaluate the adequacy of their own worldviews, no matter what conclusions they may reach.

References

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“Are You There Alone?” The Unspeakable Crime of Andrea Yates, by Suzanne O'Malley. New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004, 281 pp., \$25.00.

When a mother kills her children, how much does mental illness matter when the mother's guilt is judged in the courtroom? The case of Andrea Yates, who drowned her five children on June 21, 2001, suggests that in some cases the verdict falls before the trial starts. Although abundant evidence exists to prove that Ms. Yates suffered severe mental illness in the 2 years before and at the time of the tragedy, psychosis and delusional hopelessness were not enough for her to be judged not guilty by reason of insanity in court.

The case took an unexpected turn recently when the trial court's verdict was overturned on appeal. Although the appeals court's reasoning focused on an error by the testifying forensic psychiatrist, it is a reasonable inference that the court's ruling was based on the assumption that, other things being equal, the jury was at a tipping point. Given the facts presented, for the jury to have been at a tipping point can be understood as a reflection of a folk psychology whereby people are predisposed by the horror of an act itself to use judgmental heuristics. It is thus no wonder that Andrea Yates's acts are understood more easily as bad rather than mad, regardless of the fact pattern.

The puzzling story of Andrea Yates has now received a much needed recounting from journalist Suzanne O'Malley. *“Are You There Alone?”* is a heartfelt account of the events that led to the tragic deaths of Noah, John, Paul, Luke, and Mary Yates. O'Malley argues that psychosis with manic features, combined with medical mismanagement, stressful circumstances, and religious obsessions masking delusions, resulted in the tragedy. Her reading of the health records presents Andrea Yates's treatment as a litany of misdiagnoses, poor treatment, wrong medications, and the role of the health insurance company rather than the clinician as the key decision maker in care. Nonetheless, despite being fragmented and confusing, the medical records documented that Andrea Yates suffered serious psychotic illness and delusions before and after she drowned her children. Mentally ill or not, however, she appeared to admit to knowing that what she did was legally wrong in videotaped interviews shown in court, and the death-qualified jury found her guilty and sane according to Texas laws.

The verdict will continue toward further appeal and a potential retrial or plea bargain. O'Malley's account gives rise to questions on which a potential appeal ruling or any retrial could turn. One such question is, How valid are videotaped interviews for forensic purposes with psychotic individuals? Especially when the psychoses of those individuals before they committed the acts in question included that they were being videotaped! Moreover, by the time the videos were shot, Andrea Yates had already been repeatedly interviewed. In her aloneness with the terror of psychosis, with her delusions masking guilt and grief over her abhorrent deed and unimaginable loss, might she not seek nonverbal cues and guidance for how to maintain connection? We do not read that there was any serious exploration as to whether, in her suffering, she might have had a natural need to turn her interviewers into unwitting directors to absolve her of an otherwise unbearable confrontation with the horror.