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Review

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Book Review

Moral Responsibility

CHRISTOPHER COWLEY, 2014
London, Routledge
256 pp., £52/\$90 (hb); £16/\$29.95 (pb)

Consciousness and Moral Responsibility

NEIL LEVY, 2014
Oxford, Oxford University Press
176 pp., £27.50 (hb)

These two books on moral philosophy are contrasting and indeed complementary. Levy's essay is racy, at times quite exhilarating, and *en passant* a useful introduction to recent theories in the neuroscience of consciousness while Cowley's is a somewhat more solid engagement with an issue often neglected in moral philosophy. Levy sets out to argue, in a 'very significantly empirical' way that 'consciousness . . . of key features of our actions is a necessary condition of moral responsibility for them' (p. vi). Cowley sets out to give an 'occasionally provocative' introduction to the concept of moral responsibility. Both succeed. Throughout both keep the reader's interest by using apposite examples including that of Huckleberry Finn — a winner in terms of prising apart the role of social norms and conscience in defining moral responsiveness. In the process of what sometimes seems to be a fairly standard treatment, both use some non-standard examples and novel analyses that make the books very apt for those who need accessible and engaged introductions to what can be a dull and even off-putting (in an elderly-relative-holding-the-moral-high-ground sort of way) subject.

Cowley explores the relationship between responsibility and remorse (often influential in sentencing and parole decisions) as a feature of moral psychology that evinces the connection 'between a crime and responsibility for that crime' and he notes the role of a reasoned and public judgement about an event in bringing about a principled end to a 'cycle of violence' (pp. 19–20). His cover depicts Orestes, who acts within a nexus of socio-culturally defined quasi-noumenal responsibilities that explicitly engender moral conflict and therefore inevitably create a moral impasse which can only be resolved by a judgment of Athena, the epitome of justice and reason. The theme of conflict is later revisited in the context of a discussion of Huck Finn whose conflict reflects a mismatch between sympathy and cultural norms (p. 164). Cowley notices the internal dialogue in which Huck debates with himself the right thing to do and weighs that along with his feelings (p. 161) a debate that follows other commentators in exploring a Humean *reason versus sentiment* analysis. But Cowley mentions at several points the role of moral imagination and responsivity which combine to provide an etymological clue to follow in understanding responsibility. Huck's response and imagined responses to Jim in various possible scenarios are seen as arising from 'a primitive fact about him' based in his character (a line that Cowley develops from Charles Taylor) and provides a basis for

‘things other than reasons that could plausibly have appeared in Huck’s mind’ (p. 171). These things include the image of Jim’s trusting face, the sound of Jim’s voice, having to face Jim and see his bitter disappointment, all things which a philosopher such as Levinas would call ‘traces’ and, as such, distinct from formed or articulate memories properly nested in our representational system. These psychological realities related to what in personal and social life means something (Williams) underpin the possible meanings of his act (p. 172) but are pre-conceptual, more *responsive* than representational and yet of a piece with perceptual and adaptive responses to the presented world — the substrate of all our dealings with it whether reasoned and articulate or more intuitive and instinctive. A similar consideration based on human adaptation and change in response to interpersonal being-in-the-world could be seen to lurk behind Cowley’s interesting idea, very close to a strand of thought found in Nussbaum, of embracing life through situations that test us and thereby becoming transformed, perhaps in ways we would not favour or opt for beforehand but come to appreciate later. This strand of thought — moral growth through reflective experience — has immediate resonances with Aristotle and the pleasure to be taken in virtue through engaging with the world on terms whereby personal integrity and inner harmony become inclusive and robust through enduring qualities like trust, commitment and love.

The idea of responsivity, involving sensibility and life-skills and underpinning a capacity to engage with situations and be informed by interpersonal reality is part of a more general process of what Lovibond calls ethical formation. In mastering the relevant social and personal skills, one learns to emerge intact (even if changed) from the challenges of life, a thought deeply compatible with a late theme in the book — that of the educative effects whereby morally challenging situations produce not just good intentions but in fact a human being who is a better person (in word and deed). Cowley makes the link to Sartre but it has more venerable connections to the work of Aristotle and his discussion of character, virtue and *eudaimonia*. The under-developed idea of *responsive* (rather than, or in addition to, *reflective*) *equilibrium* as a key aspect of an ethically formed life is also deeply compatible with the approach to neuroethics found in Levy’s work.

Levy forces us to think long and hard about the link between consciousness, moral responsibility, and our neurocognitive selves a remarkable achievement given the clear and concise character of his book. There is much to appreciate here as Levy sets about examining *the consciousness thesis* — ‘that consciousness of some of the facts that give our actions their moral significance is a necessary condition for moral responsibility’ (p. 1). Levy is *for* that thesis. His argument is thoroughly grounded in contemporary cognitive neuroscience and his appeal to Huck Finn motivates an objection to the consciousness thesis based on Huck’s inability to articulate the reasons why he will not ‘turn in’ his friend Jim, the runaway slave (p. 11). Levy slips in the conflation between articulate reasons and ‘reasons of which reason knows not’ intrinsic to the trope of responsive equilibrium arguing against the common tendency in moral philosophy to use cases ‘generated using the resources of folk psychology’ and then debated in the same restricted and abstract terms. Levy recognises the difference between scientific psychology and folk psychology but does not throw the baby (an entrée into reason-giving and self-understanding according to the self-image of the age) out with the bathwater in the characteristic way that eliminativism is wont to do.

His first port of call in refining the thesis he defends is the idea of non-conscious processes and he is quick to point out the problems in an over-simplistic formulation

of brain dynamics and supervenience, elsewhere critiqued in terms of naïve ‘vertical metaphysics’. Naïve vertical metaphysics is the idea that the entities identified at ‘higher’ levels such as psychology, social reality, or the law have exact analogues identifiable at a physical level and somehow tractable in lower level ontology or metaphysics (such as that of neuroscience). This seems so implausible that one is tempted to use the word ‘daft’! Levy is, in those terms, definitely not daft but is also well aware of the tensions created by a higher level realist metaphysics (such as the realistic folk psychology of functionalism) when he claims a modest version of the thesis that the link between consciousness and moral responsibility rests on the fact that our behaviour is ‘broadly and flexibly sensitive to our personal level attitudes’ (p. 86). His focus on the global neuro-cognitive ‘workspace’ as a holistic level where moral agency can be plausibly grounded in the unique *psyche* of the individual allows a distinction between the sub-personal systems where something that roughly plays the role denoted by the term *wanting* can be disconnected from (all-in) approval, rational control and reason-responsiveness so that realistic construals (or redescriptions) of folk psychological ‘entities’ (like beliefs and desires) as functional neuro-cognitive states are not plausible. ‘The associations that underlie implicit attitudes do not form a coherent and unified set’ (p. 102), in the manner of the quasi-rational conceptual connections between folk psychological propositional attitudes, ‘they are a motley’. That disclaimer should provoke us to look hard at the interaction between our grasp of propositional content (and the ‘functions and functional states’ posited as reifications of them, and the actual neuro-cognitive processes that go on in the human nervous system with a view to limning the links between those processes, our ways of speaking and thinking about ourselves and illuminating the ways in which those orders of discourse and representation explain what we do. The embodied cognition (bottom-up and top-down) view enables cognitive neuroscience to draw on a mode of explanation and understanding proper to the way in which a human being situates him or herself in a discursive context (of speaking, being heard, acknowledging others, responding to intimations of interest and vulnerability, and so on, across all the panoply of what in social and personal life means something). That view then potentiates an integrative synthesis whereby our interactions with the world and others are subject to two shaping influences: (i) our causal trajectories through a world of contingencies that act on our nervous system; and (ii) the interpersonal and intersubjective effects of our multi-level dealings with others which are partly resonant and partly normative. These two orders then give rise to what we could call a responsive brain which connects us with the effects of our actions on the world, others, and ourselves such that we can modify our responses by taking cognisance of those complex and engaged effects.

This is Kant’s community of interaction and causal influence and it underpins a realistic construal of what one can do and ought to do in the human life-world. This human (all too human) engagement, inscribed on us and in our neural networks by the events in which we participate, is the basis of an ultra-moral sense of goodness which allows intersubjective reality to, at times, override the *mores* that we subscribe to (as in the case of Huckleberry Finn). That is not as a result of a conflict between reason and passion as traditionally construed but as a result of the mismatch between propositional abstraction and the messy world of real life.

This is no better illustrated than by our tendency to confabulate or configure what we report of ourselves (even to ourselves), in terms of what we conceive to be expected of

us so that we come out as giving an adequate account of ourselves. The rational, folk psychological and self-interested life does not regard this adaptation as open-endedly negotiable so that, in the real world, we find ourselves compelled, sometimes in the right way ('But I could not do that to her!') and sometimes otherwise ('The good that I would do, I do not'). At this point a harmony or otherwise becomes evident among the influences jostling for pre-eminence in the global neuro-cognitive workspace that is both the seat of consciousness and the well-spring of intentional action. That complex process both expresses who we are and dictates the level of control we evince when we act. Levy clearly apprehends this truth and his little gem of a book ably defends that integrative conception of our neuro-ethical being: 'consciousness plays a particular, and important, role in human behaviour; on that basis, I have argued that it is required for (direct) moral responsibility. . . . because consciousness is required for sensitivity to a broad range of internal and external cues' (p. 134). I concur (but was easy to convince because already a believer): the moral brain is the conscious brain is the responsive brain and the active construction and use of a global neuro-cognitive workspace is the basis of that three way internal relationship.

There is ample material in each of these books for a course of study in moral philosophy and psychology and Levy's work has the added merits of brevity, wit, and scientific sophistication.

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