

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Experiments in Ethics.

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Appiah's book is one of the best philosophical accounts to date to reflect on the ethical repercussions of recent research in behavioral economics. It is to be recommended to anyone interested in this new research.

The introductory chapter tells the story of the encroachment of the sciences upon the traditional terrain of philosophy, recalling that philosophy throughout nearly all of its history strongly integrated empirical work. Indeed, even the arch-rationalist, Descartes, dissected cows (7). The outcome of the late-nineteenth and twentieth century decoupling of philosophy and empirical science is not desirable: philosophy has become increasingly irrelevant, and the results of philosophical work have suffered. So Appiah pleads for philosophy to integrate scientific work more than it has (184-90). He develops a form of naturalism, but not of the scientistic sort that maintains that descriptive science can replace normative-oriented philosophy, and that biologists and cognitive psychologists are the ethical theoreticians of tomorrow, or today. His point is rather that we cannot adequately think about norms without purveying the facts, so philosophy ignores science at its own peril. A fundamental goal of his book is to convince philosophers to integrate the results of experiments in behavioral economics into ethical thought, not to bid philosophers to laboratories (3).

The rest of the book is divided into four further chapters. The fourth and fifth chapters argue for ethical realism and ethical pluralism, within boundaries. The 'end of ethics', as Appiah sees it, 'is to make sense of the project of *eudaimonia*' (203). In pursuit of this end, as each of us is 'making a life', there will be a limited number of human goods that can be of deep concern. Because these may at times conflict, ethics is bound to remain a somewhat messy business (201). Nevertheless it can offer us orientation in reference to a few fundamental human goods. In this, on the one hand, we need to recognize that the very making of a life involves 'experiments in living' as we honestly engage these real ethical options and seek out answers for ourselves; on the other, we must recognize that philosophy cannot make sense of many relevant issues without the aid of the sciences (203-4).

There is much of value in these chapters, but in the rest of this review I will focus on Appiah's more unique reflections on the challenges of behavioral economic research to virtue ethics (Chapter 2) and intuitionism (Chapter 3).

Appiah's presentation of the threats of research on bias and heuristics to theories of moral intuitionism is the better of these two chapters. The short version of the

argument is that our moral intuitions often depend on how a moral dilemma is framed. So, for example, if the negative outcome of a decision is brought to the foreground rather than the positive, empirical studies show that moral intuitions are often very different. On the basis of various studies, Appiah concludes that ‘it looks as though our intuitive judgments about what’s right to do are determined in part by things that cannot possibly be relevant’ (85); further ‘[w]hen our intuitions are guided by irrelevant factors, they can’t be reliable guides’ (85). The fundamental reason that this threatens intuitionism is that we often do not have access to full information; consequently there will often not be one ‘right’ way to frame a dilemma. In short, in many cases there is no way out of the framing problem.

This is interesting stuff. One question, however, is whether the ramifications of research on framing are even more serious than Appiah notes. For might not framing influence what a utilitarian counts as utility or which maxim a Kantian thinks he is universalizing? Indeed, the studies may have important ramifications for all moral theories. Another issue is that the attempt to do away with moral intuitions will prove difficult. Even Appiah himself, later in this book, seems to rely upon them in arguing for the various modules of moral theory (135).

Chapter 2, as noted, deals with virtue ethics. In Appiah’s view, virtue ethics is challenged by studies showing the effects of environmental conditions on our decision making. These studies undermine the view that human action is generally to be traced back to the possession of a particular kind of character. One of the representative studies referred to is Baron and Thomley’s research indicating that people are more likely to give someone change for a dollar when asked outside of a bakery rather than outside ‘a neutral-smelling dry-goods store’ (41). Another is a 1975 study in which noise levels were varied to see potential effects on people’s behavior. The results indicated that if noise levels were increased from 65 to 85 decibels, people were less likely to help someone who ‘accidentally’ dropped a stack of papers (41). These and other studies that support similar claims indicate, according to Appiah, that often our decisions are not because of our character, but because of other factors of which we are not even aware. Yet Appiah’s conclusion is rash: ‘If these psychological claims are right, very often when we credit people with compassion, as a character trait, we’re wrong. They’re just in a good mood. And if hardly anyone is virtuous in the way that virtue ethics conceives of it, isn’t the doctrine’s appeal eroded?’ (45).

Virtue ethics cannot work, he argues, because character does not exist or is only present in exceptional individuals. This particular passage shows a harried leap in logic from the view that we are ‘often’ influenced by nonrational factors to the view that ‘hardly anyone is virtuous in the way that virtue ethics conceives of it.’ The conclusion is highly questionable even if there is value in a good many of the observations that move Appiah toward it. His view is that character is not stable, so we must create conditions that elicit good behavior from people: ‘The playful man, the serious man, the patient man,

and the angry man: same fellow, different circumstances' (39). Since circumstances have such vital effects on how we behave, we need institutions that create circumstances that elicit the best in us. Unfortunately, however, this also betrays a rash leap to judgment. Even Aristotle clearly recognized that the same person would at times demonstrate anger, patience, and a whole array of other traits. Yet, some are prone to playfulness and others are rarely playful, some are prone to theft and others never steal, and so on. New kinds of environmental factors may well hold more sway than we have acknowledged. Yet this hardly means character does not exist. In rejecting character traits, Appiah overstates the extent to which our decisions are based on the wafting winds between pastry shops and dry-goods stores.

Of equally serious concern is the inconsistency of Appiah's rejection of character traits. In this book he approvingly notes that Derek Parfit's 'objective list' of elements of a good life includes things like 'being a good parent' (170). Yet, in the broadest sense, describing someone as a good parent is clearly to attribute him or her with a character trait. The same applies to any descriptions of an individual as a cosmopolitan, a racist, a chauvinist, a victimizer, or any of the other kinds of people that Appiah thinks we can become (247). Yet in accord with what he says here, all of these classifications are illegitimate. In fact, his conclusion on character here would render much of his own work superfluous given that here and in his other major books he calls upon us to become more cosmopolitan.

One further problem in Appiah's treatment of virtue ethics is that he highlights weaker versions of the theory that ignore the role of environmental factors on character. Stronger versions do not do so. In fact, even Aristotle offers a form of the institutionalism not unlike the one Appiah argues for in the final part of his book. It may indeed be that institutions should take account of realities about human behavior that have been ignored. But this does not undermine the best traditions of virtue ethics as much as it builds upon them. Further, it remains questionable whether the attempts at the creation of good character are as vain as Appiah thinks (71). Here we might just think about how views of race and gender roles have changed with the alteration of laws in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This book offers many thoughtful reflections on issues from behavioral research. Therein lies its value. Its weakness consists in the tendency to exaggerate the reach of some of these results. More tempered claims about these matters would have made this good book better, and ultimately more compatible with Appiah's more general philosophical tendencies.

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