

Introduction

In this study I propose an account of the biological and psychological bases of moral agency. I am motivated to do so by a commitment common to many philosophers: the search for what Wilfrid Sellars aptly called the *synoptic vision*, the attempt to see things as a whole: “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars 1963, p. 1). In order to achieve a synoptic vision of the whole, Sellars aimed to articulate the connections between what he termed the *manifest* and *scientific* images of human persons. A guiding principle for my investigation is the new scientific naturalistic turn in philosophy, the attempt to bring to bear the best theories and findings of the sciences in the solution of philosophical problems.

The use of the sciences has immeasurably enhanced philosophical attempts to understand such phenomena as time, space, matter, motion, change, causality, and life. Today, philosophy of mind and epistemology are both feeling the positive effects of inputs from biology and the cognitive sciences. Scientifically informed philosophical investigations have, I contend, advanced the quest for a synoptic vision of things. However, I do not believe that a synoptic vision of human beings can be achieved without a similar endeavor in ethics or moral philosophy. I believe that the natural and social sciences can contribute significantly to answering traditional ethical questions about the nature and function of morality and the justification of moral claims. My goal is to set forth a proposal for a naturalistically based account of moral agency, one that makes substantive use of recent findings and theories in evolutionary theory, developmental biology, and psychology, as well as in behavioral and cognitive behavioral psychology. I make no claims to have surveyed, let alone assessed and integrated, the prodigious amount of biological or psychological literature that *prima facie* appears relevant to providing an account of the biological and psychological

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bases of moral agency. Nor do I pretend to examine and assess the multitude of philosophical accounts of moral agency. The issues, approaches, and materials I take up are to some extent due to autobiographical vagaries; despite that, my hope is that they are sufficiently relevant to the development of a naturalistic account of moral agency that they will foster further thought, reflection, and development of such an account. A more complete scientific naturalistic account will require an examination of the relevant contributions of the social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, political science, and economics.

The plausibility of such scientific naturalistic accounts is to be measured not only by the extent to which they themselves offer satisfactory answers to the central questions of moral agency, but also by the extent to which they provide more satisfactory alternatives to autonomous commonsense, philosophical, or religious accounts of moral agency. In addition, a successful scientific, naturalistic account ought to provide a more satisfactory articulation of the connections between our ordinary conceptions of moral agency (roughly Sellars's manifest image) and scientific accounts than those provided by its nonnaturalistic competitors. However, for the most part, I leave such an assessment of comparative merit for another day.

The book is divided into five parts. In Part I, I outline, and set the stage for the development of, my scientific naturalistic account of moral agency. I formulate four central questions that an adequate theory of moral agency needs to answer: (1) what counts as moral agency, both substantively and functionally? (the question of relevance); (2) how do we acquire our capacities as moral agents? (the question of acquisition); (3) how do we put these capacities to work? (the question of action); and (4) what makes for justified true moral beliefs, proper moral motivations, and successful moral action? (the question of adequacy). In order to answer these questions, I propose a biologically and psychologically based model of moral agency that has four levels: (1) a base level, consisting of both biologically and psychologically based (though minimally cognitive) moral capacities; (2) a behavioral level, consisting of cognitively acquired moral beliefs and desires, that is the immediate source of moral behaviors; (3) a reflective level, composed of moral beliefs and desires concerning the behavioral-level moral beliefs and desires and regulative of the latter, as, for instance, moral norms seem to be; and, finally, (4) a self-referentially reflective level by means of which an agent conceives of herself as a moral agent. My contention is that, by using this model of moral agency, we can make substantial progress in answering the central questions about moral agency.

The proposed model instantiates an integrationist position on the question of how the sciences might contribute to answering questions about

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moral agency. The integrationist position I adopt holds that disciplines in biology and psychology can and ought to make significant contributions to answering questions about moral agency by (1) providing the information necessary for making moral decisions both at the applied level and at the normative level; (2) describing and explaining human moral capacities, both their acquisition and maintenance, as well as their operation; (3) providing some bases for moral norms; (4) furnishing accounts of the justification of moral beliefs, motivations, and actions, as well as a theory about moral realities; (5) enabling a critique of alternative accounts of ethics, for instance, commonsense or folk psychologically based ethics, a priori moral philosophy, or religious ethics, as well as those of reductionist or eliminativist stripes; and, finally, (6) addressing questions of the meaning of ethics from a scientific naturalistic perspective. The success of the proposed model and the provision of a satisfying synoptic vision of moral agency would lend further weight to these integrationist hypotheses about the connections between the sciences, especially biology, psychology, and ethics, and to the scientific naturalistic approach to philosophy generally.¹

In Part II, I explore the evolutionary bases of moral agency. In Chapter 2, I distinguish three themes from evolutionary theory that link it with issues of moral agency: first, our evolutionarily fashioned human nature; second, our evolutionarily based social nature; and third, our evolutionarily based altruistic tendencies. I maintain that the findings from evolutionary theory and sociobiology are relevant to moral agency and argue for the theoretical plausibility of the existence of evolutionarily based moral capacities. Next, in Chapter 3, I proceed to the question of the actual existence and nature of such capacities, examining the contribution of E. O. Wilson. Although some biologists, for example, George C. Williams, find biology and morality to be in mortal conflict and others, like Richard Alexander, see morality to be in the service of biology, I argue that Wilson's vision of biology in the service of morality is preferable but that his proposal for a biologically based account of moral agency is flawed. Besides requiring further empirical support, it must be revised from an evolutionary perspective and supplemented by developmental and psychological perspectives. Chapter 4 is devoted to ontogeny and development. There I turn to the work of developmental psychologist Martin Hoffman on our capacity for empathic distress to outline the case for the existence of one component of a evolutionarily based but plastic moral sense, that is, one that is open to environmental input and learning.

The introduction of learning, even in the case of evolutionarily based moral capacities, leads us naturally in Part III to a consideration of the psychological bases of moral agency. I explore and assess the contribution

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of B. F. Skinner's "science of values" to an account of moral agency in Chapter 5 and argue that, despite its behaviorist limitations, the operantly conditioned capacities that he postulates can be incorporated at the base level of an integrationist model of moral agency. I turn in Chapter 6 to the results of the cognitive revolution in psychology and contend that their incorporation into an integrationist account of moral agency requires the introduction of a cognitive-behavioral level into our model of moral agency. In doing so, I must meet the challenge of what I call an *investigative dilemma*: The most adequate theories of acquisition and action, the so-called social learning theories, seem to be morally irrelevant, that is, they do not appear to be about morality at all, and the psychological theories that seem to be most clearly about moral agency, specifically, the cognitive developmental theories, appear to be unable to answer questions concerning the acquisition and enactment of moral agency. So an integrationist is faced with the charge of either proposing theories of agency that are irrelevant to moral agency or proposing a theory of moral agency that seems to be genuinely about morality but fails to answer in an adequately scientific fashion the questions of acquisition and action. I resolve the investigative dilemma by taking up the side of cognitive social learning theories, in particular Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, and argue that the charge of irrelevance fails. In so doing, I complete the presentation of my scientific naturalistic model of moral agency, showing that Bandura's theory provides scientific support for the reflective and self-referentially reflective levels of moral agency.

In Chapter 7, I address a second challenge to my integrationist approach, what I call the *reductionist predicament*. It maintains, on the one hand, that any adequately scientific account of human agency may in fact demand the elimination of factors apparently necessary for moral agency, at least moral agency conceived in folk-psychological terms, that is, in terms of beliefs and desires. On the other hand, if the integrationist fails to make use of adequately supported scientific categories and theories, she is left with the uninviting prospect of abandoning her scientific and naturalistic commitments in order to hold on to an adequate model of moral agency. I consider some findings in the neurosciences about the neurophysiological bases of our cognitive and agential capacities and the implications of these findings for the reduction or elimination of our folk-psychological categories of agency. In response, I elaborate an emergentist account of moral agency and argue that currently, at least, such an account can hold its own empirically against reductionist and eliminativist counterproposals. Thus, I contend that the integrationist emerges from the trials of the reductionist predicament with a modest confidence that she has an account of moral agency that

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answers the questions of action and acquisition with relative scientific adequacy, given the current state of development in the relevant scientific disciplines. Moreover, I hold that she has met the challenge of irrelevance by clearly exhibiting that her scientifically elaborated account of agency is indeed about moral agency. In terms of the substantive connections between the sciences and ethics, I conclude that I have gone a long way toward confirming an explanatory connection, as well as illustrating the way that an integrationist account can enable critiques of alternative accounts of moral agency.

Part IV addresses the last of the major questions about moral agency: the question of adequacy. Answering this question enables the integrationist, in turn, to support the metaethical connection hypothesis. Drawing on recent work in naturalized epistemology, I argue in Chapter 8 that justifications of moral beliefs, motivations, and actions should be conceived of in terms of reliable mechanisms. I illustrate this approach by making use of some of the mechanisms of acquisition and action already laid out in answering the questions of acquisition and action. Answering the question of adequacy also supports the epistemological component of my case for the metaethical connection hypothesis and leads naturally to the ontological side of that hypothesis and the question of the nature of moral realities. I address that question in Chapter 9, taking up the controversial path of moral realism and contending that moral realities are complex relational realities composed of moral agents, objective moral values, and the causal relationships that unite them. Discussion of ontological issues completes my case for the explanatory and metaethical connection hypotheses.

I take up the critical connection and meaningfulness hypotheses in Chapter 10, which constitutes Part V. With regard to the former, I contend that although separatist worries have not been entirely silenced, the main threat to the integrationist position comes from eliminativism. So I once again address these concerns, making use of Wilfrid Sellars's idea of the synoptic vision and the way that representations of persons as intentional agents differ from descriptions and explanations of human cognitive capacities. I argue that even though folk-psychological accounts of the latter may be eliminated, that sort of elimination does not touch human agential capacities *qua* agential. I address the meaningfulness hypothesis by proposing a scientific naturalistic theory of meaningfulness and comparing it with separatist accounts of the meaningfulness of moral agency stemming from both religious and humanistic perspectives.

While recognizing the preliminary and incomplete character of these efforts, I conclude that a scientific naturalistic model of moral agency of the sort that I have proposed is a plausible one and worthy of further investiga-

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tion, and that the integrationist hypotheses on which the model is built provide a fruitful approach to the investigation of moral agency. By these means, I hope to have extended the synoptic vision concerning human persons and to have given further support to a scientific naturalistic pursuit of this vision.

NOTE

1. I shall assume that the informational connection is unproblematic and, although the question of whether findings from biology and psychology can provide substantive input to moral norms is an important issue for any integrationist account, I shall not address it here. To that extent, my account remains significantly incomplete.

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I

Moral agency and scientific naturalism

1

Understanding moral agency

What is a scientific naturalistic view of moral agency?

1.1 MORAL AGENCY

We begin by considering an ordinary perspective on being a moral agent. By an ordinary perspective I mean one that is shaped by our ordinary experience of and reflection on being a moral agent. You can probably recall many small and some very large moral decisions in your life. Some of these are more personal – regarding, for instance, telling the truth in a situation where the truth was rightfully demanded, but it was in your interest to be silent or to shade your story. Some decisions may have been more communal – whether, for instance, your professional group or union should actively oppose or support the right of a woman to have an abortion. Many decisions, no doubt, concerned issues in which science and technology played some part in both the problem and possible solutions. Should I carpool? Should I support a movement in Congress to eliminate funding for environmental protection? What does the ordinary perspective on moral agency say about moral agency given experiences of the preceding sort and reflection on them? It probably says a lot of different things since, on one level, there are as many experiences and reflections as experiencers and persons reflecting on their experiences. However, let's generalize and see if we can say some broad things about moral agency.

On one ordinary view of moral agency, a person acts in a morally correct fashion when she acts on the basis of adequate moral beliefs correctly applied to a particular situation. So, for instance, you have decided that even though it costs you some valuable time, the right thing to do is to form a carpool to get to work and back. You base your decision on the importance of improving the air quality in your city. You believe that you have an obligation to do something in that regard since air quality is important for the public and for the living things in the city. Your time is also important, but not so important that the loss of the 15 to 30 minutes a day that the

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carpooling would involve morally outweighs the contribution to air quality brought about by the use of three fewer autos a day for five days a week.

The use of moral beliefs to guide action serves as a mark of moral agency. One can raise a number of questions about moral agency so described: (1) How does one acquire moral beliefs? (2) How does one put these moral beliefs to work? (3) How does one assess the adequacy of these beliefs and actions? (4) What makes action on the basis of moral belief the relevant criterion for the identification of moral agency? These questions concern the issues of acquisition, action, justification, and relevance, respectively.

Going back to our example, we can ask ourselves these same questions about that particular moral decision. How did we come to the moral belief that the moral goods of carpooling outweighed the moral goods of individualized transportation? How did we acquire the belief that preservation of air quality was morally valuable or, more fundamentally, that it was morally wrong to harm the health of others? We can also inquire about our motivations. Let's say that motivations are roughly what can lead us to act on our moral beliefs. There are many things that we believe but that do not motivate us to do anything. Someone may know that air pollution harms the health of many people. He may also realize that he is adding to air pollution by driving to work and back every day all by himself. He may even be aware that there are alternatives, carpools, that he could join. But none of this moves him to action. So we have to ask ourselves not only how we come to have certain moral beliefs, but what it is that moves us to act on our beliefs. Is it something about a moral belief that makes it motivating in itself or do we need something else besides our moral convictions to move us to act on them?

But even supposing that we have acquired a set of moral beliefs and have been motivated to act on them, we can still raise the question of what justifies our action. Is what we are doing by carpooling the right thing to do in the circumstances? If so, how do we know that it is? Suppose we are asked to justify our decision. A critic may challenge some of the facts about our decision, the relative harmfulness of auto emissions, for instance. Do we have our facts correct? Or she may challenge our ethical reasoning, arguing that we have no obligation, at least at present, to make such a major sacrifice of time. More radically, she may argue that we have no definite obligations to help others preserve their health, and that even if others are polluting the air, we certainly don't have to stop doing so until they stop too. These questions and challenges raise questions about the correctness of our moral decision. They belong to the issue of justification. So, just as moral agency requires an account of how we developed our moral beliefs and what en-

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ables us to put them into action, it also requires that we attempt to show that these beliefs, and the practices that flow from them, are, to the best of our knowledge, justified, that is, morally right.

But all of these questions presuppose that we know what counts as being in the moral realm. Someone might agree with our decision about carpooling but think that we shouldn't really speak of it as a moral decision. Morality has to do, she might argue, with interpersonal relationships, not with public policy issues like pollution and carpooling. Those issues may belong to the legal realm. Perhaps there could be a law that carpooling is required and one could break the law by failing to do so. But such an infringement would be illegal, not immoral. Similarly, someone could argue that preserving the environment is a matter of prudence and aesthetics. We should not waste resources, especially if they are becoming scarce. To do so would be imprudent. We would not be seeing to our future in a way that is more beneficial to us and our children. In addition, the destruction of the environment that air pollution entails detracts from its aesthetic value. So if carpooling, in fact, helps to preserve the environment, then it is the aesthetic thing to do but not the moral thing to do. These reflections lead us to conclude that in order to understand moral agency, we need to have some grasp of what belongs to the moral realm and what doesn't. It will not do merely to distinguish the morally right and wrong thing to do, something that we think we have accomplished, provided that we have some justification for what we have decided to do. Important as this is, there is the prior question of what belongs in the moral realm, whether something is amoral or nonmoral, as opposed to whether it is a morally correct or incorrect action. Some legal matters may touch on moral issues, but others may be purely legal – for instance, that you need a notary public to certify that you have properly signed a document of a sale of property.

1.2 THE SCIENCES AND THE THEORETICAL PROBLEMS OF MORAL AGENCY

These questions about moral agency, about acquisition, action, justification, and relevance, certainly are not new. We have as a species been engaged in trying to clarify them and suggest answers to them for a long time. Both ordinary moral agents and philosophers have been involved in this task. Ordinary experience and reflection suggest a variety of answers to these questions. Philosophical theories attempt to clarify and refine those answers, as well as determine which ones might be preferable. For instance, we need to learn to be moral agents, yet the precise roles of nature and