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Virtue and the Need for Heroes

Abstract

Ronald Zigler has intended to take us on an educational adventure, a descent into the moral underworld of human biology, in search of "a theory of virtue and how it can be taught." With the shade of John Dewey as guide, intoning the admonition that "all virtues and vices are habits," Zigler tracks the sources of aggression through the epigenetic land and, lo, approaches even unto the hypothalamus itself. He returns blinking into the daylight of moral education, clutching the truth that training in meditation is a key to the development of virtue, because it can "promote the functional integration of the nervous system" and dissipate the aggression that comes from "biological errors." As I read the tale, however, Zigler has wandered so blindly and won a prize so meager, I must ask, "Was this trip really necessary?" Put directly, I believe the paper has fatal flaws. [excerpt]

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VIRTUE AND THE NEED FOR HEROES

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Ronald Zigler has intended to take us on an educational adventure, a descent into the moral underworld of human biology, in search of "a theory of virtue and how it can be taught." With the shade of John Dewey as guide, intoning the admonition that "all virtues and vices are habits," Zigler tracks the sources of aggression through the epigenetic landscape and, lo, approaches even unto the hypothalamus itself. He returns blinking into the daylight of moral education, clutching the truth that training in meditation is a key to the development of virtue, because it can "promote the functional integration of the nervous system" and dissipate the aggression that comes from "biological errors." As I read the tale, however, Zigler has wandered so blindly and won a prize so meager, I must ask, "Was this trip really necessary?" Put directly, I believe the paper has fatal flaws.

Zigler has dallied with the obvious and the tautologous. "It appears clear . . .," he finds, "that individual health and social relations may be impaired by the excessive, inappropriate visceral responses accompanying anger . . . and aggressive behavior." Tentatively he concludes that the physiological bases of aggression "it would appear, may be extremely relevant to moral science . . ."

He has consorted with the illogical and the confused. Asserting that it is difficult to distinguish anger from moral indignation, he traces this difficulty to "the fact that they both appear to be regulated by the hypothalamus." This is like claiming it is difficult to distinguish raising my arm from wiggling my toe because both are regulated by the brain. By identifying Dewey's illustration of the habit of giving way to anger with E.O. Wilson's claims for the hypothalamus as the oracle of human values, Zigler confuses the issue of acquired versus inherited response patterns. Throughout the paper there is a notion of inner versus outer perspectives that is troublesome, as when he refers to "an external habit."

He has performed curious feats of conclusion jumping: affirming for example that Dewey's moral science has been neglected because of his unusual but prophetic concept of habit, or concluding that there is a "prevalence of biological errors" today because forms of aggression are widespread, or deciding without fanfare that aggression (or hate or anger) is the central problem of ethics. Surely all these require support, argument and empirical evidence, to serve us heuristically.

Perhaps the prize is meager because the hero doesn't suffer enough—doesn't wrestle with any of the formidable issues he locates. He sets aside, for example, the extent to which physiological structures related to morality are inherited, the possibility that we are predisposed to acquire certain specific values or norms, the exploration of the concept of a biological error, the sources of criteria for "good or bad emotions," the cognitive differences among emotions, any criticism of Wilson's odd notion that philosophers consult their hypothalamus for their ethical standards, the development of the distinction of virtue and vice, and a focused discussion of the role of meditation in moral education.

Flaws notwithstanding, Zigler is after a worthy goal—an account of the virtues and our emotions that is informed by biological perspectives. And the problems *are* genuinely formidable. We must negotiate between the Scylla of committing the Naturalistic Fallacy, deriving values from biological facts, and the Charybdis of severing our ethics from our understanding of human nature. We must acknowledge our "hodgepodge of special genetic adaptations to an environment largely vanished" (Wilson's phrase), strive to understand the constraints and opportunities of our contemporary environment, and educate ourselves—all at the same time.

Let me focus for a moment on a single, basic issue: the question of free will, the capacity for autonomous decision or moral choice.¹ Neither Zigler nor Wilson has attempted to write a close and careful argument concerning determinism, but the issue hides in the background and peeks through here and there, especially in Wilson's *On Human Nature*.² I can find two very different models of free will at work.

The first is an interesting version of compatibilism that tries to retain both determinism and freedom by making the latter a relative or perspectival term. A technical formulation of this notion goes, I believe, as follows: *A* has free will for *B* (or from *B*'s perspective) if and only if the number and the complexity of the variables affecting *A*'s behavior exceed the capacity of *B*'s brain (or intelligence), where *A* and *B* may be the same individual. What this means is that I may say correctly that I have free will if I cannot in principle completely predict my behavior. This is a soft determinism, of course, since it is still the case that the uncomprehended variables function according to sets of causal laws beyond the simultaneous grasp of my understanding. Being free and responsible, it turns out, is a function of our finiteness. Unfortunately it is not clear on this model why our unpredictability should occur peculiarly in

the moral arena and especially in situations of deliberation and choice. Nor is the simple fact of unpredictability easily transformed into the fact of free moral agency.

The second model is very different. On this model our genetic programming and our personal history of conditioning normally determine our behavior; we run along smoothly as though on "automatic pilot" in our normal mode of functioning. But interestingly we humans are wired with a kind of "manual override." When we engage this device, we "take over the controls" of our behavior, acting freely and decisively and with full deliberateness. Wilson introduces this model in explicating one of the dilemmas he puts before his readers: which of our genetically programmed sensors and motivators should be obeyed or amplified, which curtailed or sublimated?

Although this picture seems closer to the traditional ethical and religious concepts of moral agency and free choice, I confess I cannot see how the actions of the manual override, which must be genetically designed into the neuronal equipment of our brains, can be freer and more morally responsible than those of the automatic pilot. Who or what is in the pilot's seat? Under what conditions does it take over? Does it monitor alertly in continual readiness? And on what basis are the "manual control" decisions made? When we consider the issue of amplifying or restraining our evolved propensities, and of altering or engineering our genetically-based capacities, what can we utilize in this "considering" except the very same genetically endowed capacities for valuing and deliberating? Surely the acquisition of biological knowledge can create only the *data* and not the *capacity* for "precise steering." Wilson needs to retain some such picture as the autonomous manual override in order for us to have any genuine dilemmas at all. Unless we have more than one live option, whatever is going to happen is all that every really could have happened.

This predicament, present in both Wilson and Zigler's work, calls to mind Immanuel Kant's somewhat reluctant conclusion that freedom cannot be explained because to explain a thing is to locate sensible occurrences of it and then to comprehend these in causal laws—which is by definition antithetical to freedom; nevertheless, we must assume freedom in order to act (or I may say, to educate) at all.

I agree with Zigler that understanding our emotions and developing a theory of virtues is a fruitful path—the links between biology and morality are particularly strong in these areas. But progress will require a more careful and heroic effort.

1. My discussion is drawn almost verbatim from an earlier paper of mine criticizing Wilson: "Sociobiology and Religion: A Discussion of the Issues," *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* (Vol. 15, No. 4; December 1980; pp. 407-423).

2. Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).