The ‘New Synthesis in Moral Psychology’ versus Aristotelianism. Content and Consequences

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Abstract
The aim of this chapter is to explore the social consequences of recent developments in moral psychology aimed at psychologizing morality: developments that Jonathan Haidt terms ‘the new synthesis’ (NS). As a prelude, I diagnose what in the content of the NS undergirds those consequences and how it differs from the Aristotelian alternatives with which it is commonly contrasted. More specifically, I explore the NS’s take on moral ontology, moral motivation, moral ecology and moral domains. In all cases, I deem the response offered by the NS to radical rationalism hyperbolic and argue that Aristotelianism provides a more plausible, if more moderate, alternative. In the final section, I address the putative social consequences of the NS, both general consequences for public conceptions of the moral life and more specific consequences for moral education at school. In both cases, I argue that the consequences of adopting the NS position range from the unfortunate to the outright pernicious.

1 Introduction

This chapter owes its inception to a request for an exploration of the ‘social consequences’ of recent developments in moral psychology: developments that, to varying degrees, aim at psychologizing morality. The developments that have been gaining currency in recent years are sweeping in compass; they have aptly, if ambitiously, been named “the new synthesis in moral psychology” (Haidt 2007) and incorporate diverse
philosophical and psychological insights. My aim, in a nutshell, is to critique this new synthesis from an Aristotelian perspective and to suggest Aristotelian alternatives. Many of the concerns that I raise are not entirely new; they have been broached before by Aristotelians. What remains is to synthesize and systematize those concerns in relation to the ‘new synthesis’: a task that I begin in this chapter although more work will clearly be required to complete it.

I need to extend somewhat the remit of exploring putative social consequences. The reason is that any such consequences must be understood as ramifications of the content of the ‘new synthesis’. Thus, although the chapter culminates in a section (Sect. 5) which argues that the social consequences of the ‘new synthesis’ range from the unfortunate to the outright pernicious, it behooves me to diagnose what, precisely, in the content of the ‘new synthesis’ undergirds and motivates those consequences, and how it differs from the Aristotelian alternatives. I do so in Sect. 2 (a general discussion), Sect. 3 (on moral ontology and moral motivation) and Sect. 4 (on moral ecology and moral domains).

It remains to explain what I mean by ‘social consequences’. If taken at face value as referring to consequences for, say, public policy and lay moral conceptions – or even for the level of general well-being in society – someone might question whether scholarly ideas in philosophy ever have salient consequences of that sort. The obvious counter-example of Marxism would not necessarily cut ice with sceptics, for they could argue that the Marxism which had such a profound influence on 20th century social history was not really Marxism qua philosophical theory (dialectical materialism) but rather Marxism qua economic-cum-political theory. After all, few common people were swayed towards revolutionary activity by reading Engels’s puerile ruminations on the nature of matter and consciousness. I return to the issue of the possible social ramifications of philosophical positions in Sect. 5; let it suffice to say here that I do, indeed, believe that the ‘new synthesis’ does have the potential to enact significant changes in the public consciousness and that I find those changes disquieting. A significant portion of Sect. 5 will, however, be taken up by a discussion of consequences in a narrower sense: consequences for the content of moral education at school. There, at least, few would question the potential causal and logical links between scholarly ideas and practical consequences (for the sort of education that young people are offered in the classroom). Without getting unduly ahead of my argument, I can announce here that I also deem those more specific social consequences disconcerting.