Review of Tamler Sommers's Book
A Very Bad Wizard: Morality Behind the Curtain
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A Very Bad Wizard: Morality Behind the Curtain
By TAMLER SOMMERS
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A Very Bad Wizard is a collection of delightful interviews or conversations conducted by philosopher Tamler Sommers. Sommers interviews an array of researchers—from psychologists to primatologists to philosophers—who all have one thing in common: their work has direct implications for the study of morality. The distinguished interviewees are Galen Strawson, Philip Zimabrdo, Franz De Waal, Michael Ruse, Joseph Henrich, Joshua Greene, Liane Young, Jonathan Haidt, Stephen Stich, and William Ian Miller. I read the book on my flights back to the West Coast after picking it up a few days prior in Massachusetts. I simply couldn't put it down! It truly is—as Steven Pinker states in his blurb—both thought-provoking and entertaining. It's is a lively way into some of the most fascinating interdisciplinary research on ethics—what often now goes under the heading "moral psychology."

As Sommers notes in the acknowledgements, the interview format of the book may seem fairly non-academic. And so it may seem fit for something only the novice should pick up. But while it does provide a rather informal presentation of the thinkers' ideas, there's plenty of material sure to interest even the specialist. In particular, the book's format provides a rare glimpse into these academics' motivations for carrying out their research and their broader views about its implications. Even more than seeing morality behind the curtain, as the book's subtitle promises, the reader sees these researchers behind their respective curtains.

Many topics are discussed in the book's interviews, but some highlights come up in conversations with Zimbardo, Greene and Young, and Haidt. Zimbardo, a social psychologist, talks about his famous Stanford Prison Experiment in which a group of ordinary young men assumed either a guard or prisoner role in a simulated prison at Stanford University in 1971. The experiment was shut down after only six days due to the inhumane behavior the guards began to display. This is one of the many classic experiments indicating that situations can affect our behavior more than we ordinarily think. Simply because of a nasty situation, a generally good person can end up doing quite horrible things.

Greene and Young, neuroscientists at Harvard and MIT respectively, get right down to the human brain. Their work suggests that certain intuitions about some important cases in moral theory (the famous "trolley cases") are influenced by emotional reactions while others aren't, or at least not as much. Scan a person's brain while she's reading the scenario and providing the judgment, and the areas of the brain associated with emotion show much higher levels of activity. Greene in particular uses these results to argue that one moral theory—the utilitarian one not based on the faulty intuitions—is preferable over the other. While the research program is still

developing, Greene is certainly pioneering exciting ways in which brain imaging can be quite relevant to ethics.

Haidt, also a social psychologist, talks primarily about his recent work on "moral dumbfounding." Haidt conducted a series of interesting experiments in which subjects read stories involving actions that don't cause anyone harm but violate certain other societal norms, such as protected and consensual incest between adults or eating the family dog after it has been run over. Subjects tend to emphatically label the acts immoral, but they can't come up with a good reason why. Haidt argues that these sorts of findings support a model according to which moral judgments are primarily driven by emotional reactions, as opposed to reasoning, in much the same way judgments of taste (presumably) are.

Though various issues arise throughout the book, one over-arching theme revolves around the question: What is the status of morality once we subject it to empirical scrutiny? While Sommers (p. 3) thinks we "shouldn't be scared about what we'll find" by pulling back morality's curtain, the resulting impression the reader attains is a rather dismal one. Moral realism—roughly the view that there are in some sense objective facts about what's right and wrong—is quickly put off the table by most in the book. This is largely based on empirical evidence indicating that the psychological mechanisms involved in moral judgment and behavior are merely evolutionary adaptations triggered largely by flimsy emotional responses which vary dramatically across cultures and situations. This often leads to a thorough-going cultural relativism. Henrich, for example, says: "My view is that it's wrong to beat your wife, but that there's no objective standard. It's just wrong for me to do it" (p. 119). Others, such as Greene, espouse some version of error theory according to which our moral beliefs are systematically false. Even more extreme perhaps is a full-blown non-cognitivism—the view that moral judgments are not even capable of being true or false (see Stich, p. 188, for example). On such a view, there aren't any moral facts at all, not even culturally relative ones!

There are some representative exceptions to the bleak view, of course. De Waal (a primatologist), Miller (a law professor), and Haidt are notable examples. At one point, De Waal firmly objects to those who argue, for example, that human empathy is "some sort of afterthought of evolution or something contrived" or that "we are never *truly* empathic and kind" (p. 74). According to De Waal, the apparently moral behavior and emotions of primates provides key "building blocks" or "prerequisites" for human morality. Haidt, also in a more positive vein, is quite attune to the fact that one can deny strong forms of moral realism while still holding that there are important facts of the matter, though they may be in some sense relative to something or other: "[W]ith morality, we build a castle in the air and then we live in it, but it is a real castle. It has no objective foundation, a foundation outside of our fantasy—but that's true about money, that's true about music, that's true about most of the things that we care about" (p. 161). But even here Haidt seems to put an unnecessarily gloomy spin on this picture. Does morality have "no objective foundation" whatsoever even if it's grounded in human nature, for example, in the empathic responses we have to the needs of others? Likewise, though we play a large role in the creation of money and its significance, is its existence really just a "fantasy"?

Of course, Sommers can't be faulted for the arguably excessive and potentially misleading pessimism of some of the interviewees. However, he does sometimes join in on partitioning the space of reasonable views in an overly restrictive way. For example, in his introduction to his

conversation with Ruse, Sommers seems to characterizes the two main positions here as either realist and anti-scientific or anti-realist and empirically-informed (pp. 85-6). Surely any empirically-informed view must admit that morality is intimately bound up with our own concerns and natures. But the idea that our natural, evolved mechanisms for moral judgment and behavior are doing something more like detection than capricious fabrication could be given some more consideration.

Nevertheless, as one commentator has already put it, *A Very Bad Wizard* is a very good book. It's an easy read while at the same time informative and amusing. I highly recommend it to anyone, expert or novice, interested in modern research on morality—or in just seeing academics cuss.

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