

ON TESTING MORAL THEORIES

by Arthur Zucker

In "The Validity of Moral Theories" Virginia Held argues that there is a way of testing moral theories (Held 1983). She says, "*our choices*, when actually acted on in test situations with awareness that we are in them, put moral theories to the test. If we understand a test as a way of seeing how a theory stands up to the challenges of actual experience, we in this way test our theories through action" (Held 1983, 172). The actual experience she has in mind is of course moral experience. Held characterizes moral experience as "the experience of consciously choosing, of voluntarily accepting or rejecting, of willingly approving or disapproving, of living with these choices, and above all of acting and of living with these actions and their outcomes" (Held 1983, 173).

Held is correct, I think, in pointing out that there is nothing methodologically suspect—there is no question begging—in using a particular moral experience to judge a moral theory, because all this signifies is that we are, in effect, comparing rival theories. We do this with the only kind of evidence we have, with what some philosophers might call our moral intuitions. But I do not think that her characterization of the moral experience can save her from a host of problems, including an unfair and offhand rejection of W. D. Ross, whose views I shall suggest are quite congenial to Held's.

If a theory can be tested only "under fire" then Held has already presupposed an answer to a difficult practical moral question. Who has the better "look" at a moral problem, one who is living through it or one who sees it from a distance? One need not hold to an Ideal Observer theory in order to want an answer to this question. Moreover, testing theories under fire as she suggests will only test that part of the theory which tells us how to choose in difficult circumstances. It will not necessarily judge that part of the theory meant to tell us how to justify actions in retrospect, nor will it necessarily judge that part of the theory which allows us to judge other people. These may be equivalent ques-

Arthur Zucker is assistant professor of history and philosophy of science, College of Medicine, Pennsylvania State University, Post Office Box 850, Hershey, Pennsylvania 17033.

[*Zygon*, vol. 19, no. 1 (March 1984).]

© 1984 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0044-5614

tions, or these may not be important questions, or they may not be proper parts of any moral theory. But such issues require more argument.

Also in need of further discussion is what appears to be support for relativism. If I as moral experiencer am somewhat idiosyncratic, then my moral experiences, although perhaps consistent with my moral theory, may well be at odds with the moral experiences of others. In other words, by not considering generalizability as part of the test situation, Held has made it fairly easy to justify a moral relativism. This, of course, may not be a flaw, but again it needs addressing if her argument is to be complete.

Held's characterization of the moral experience is a characterization of a set of experiences and not of one experience. One experience in the set is living with the outcome of the choice. However, why should the outcome count? If Held means *outcome* in the sense that a Kantian means *consequences* then again there is an argument missing, for the Kantian would dismiss the importance of the outcome. If Held includes and stresses the moral experience of approval or disapproval as part of the outcome, then the testing is complete and perhaps the Kantian answered. But is it even wise to live through an entire test situation in order to judge a moral theory? If the moral experience can come early enough in the test situation, then why live through the rest? This problem is analogous to one sometimes faced by medical researchers. In the experimental comparison of two medical treatments, sometimes one treatment seems to be so much better than another that, even before the proposed endpoint of the experiment is reached, the testing is called to a halt because it is felt that it would be unethical to expose subjects to the less valuable treatment.

Why not test moral theories against our moral intuitions at the start of an experimental situation? Why not use thought experiments as a preliminary test ground? This has the advantage over the test under fire in that we do not have to wait for a difficult circumstance to arise before the test can be done. In actual practice truly difficult situations do not arise often enough, while the easy cases are probably not true tests for any moral theory, since, if a moral theory cannot stand up to an easy case, we will almost certainly have realized this before we are even tempted to entertain the moral theory. Seen in this light, Held may offer less of a practical solution to the testing of moral theories than do John Rawls and R. M. Hare.

Moreover, Ross, whom she dismisses with an offhand comment, is closer to Held than she lets on. She comments about Ross that it is surely misplaced to argue that "when two or more *prima facie* principles conflict when applied to a given situation, we can get no guidance

from morality but must simply take a chance that good fortune will guide us to the right act. . . ." (Held 1983, 175).

Yet Ross and Held are similar in that they both want to test theory against moral intuition. Ross says that there is much truth in calling a right act a fortunate act because we cannot ever be certain that, when two principles conflict, our choice will certainly be right. Our opinions in this area and in aesthetics are more or less probable. Ross asks that we do the best we can by considering with all our abilities the prima facie rightness and wrongness of a proposed action (Ross 1930, 31). Later in the same chapter, Ross says,

In ethics, no such appeal [to sense experience as is available to the scientist] is possible. We have no more direct way of access to the facts about rightness and goodness and about what things are right or good, than by thinking about them; the moral convictions of thoughtful and well educated people are the data of ethics just as sense perceptions are the data of natural science. Just as some of the latter have to be rejected as illusory, so have some of the former . . . when they are in conflict with other convictions which stand better the test of reflection (Ross 1930, 40-41).

Whether Ross's idea of a test is exactly like Held's is a complex question. Ross uses typical philosophical examples or thought experiments on pages 34 through 38 of *The Right and the Good* to show what "we really think about questions." This is an important difference from Held's view, which requires the test under fire. But since Ross believes that we come to our moral intuitions only by experience of individual cases of feelings of moral obligatoriness, Ross and Held may not be so far apart.

Admittedly, however, how fair Held was to Ross is only an interesting but not a crucial question. What may be crucial is that what Held's test will reject is the application of a theory to an instance, not necessarily the theory itself. In the case of science, which Held is taking as a paradigm, it is not at all clear what it means to say that choices between rival theories are made "at the level of particular observation statements" (Held 1983, 172). For example, it took about 25 years to convince most geneticists that DNA and not protein was the genetic material. During those 25 years there were many facts and hypotheses. But it is hard to say that in 1951-52 the choice was made solely as the result of the Hershey-Chase experiment, which is a scientific analogue to Held's level of particular observation statements. This is because the same sorts of observations, more accurately made, were available in 1944 from the work of O. T. Avery, C. M. McCleod, and M. McCarty. Furthermore from around 1938 other evidence that DNA was the genetic material was also available, but misinterpreted (Olby 1974, chaps. 11-14).

This is not to say that one could not make precise the expression "choice at the level of particular observations statements," but until it is made precise, a theory like Held's about the testing of moral theories is bound to need further clarification. Not only may her test requirements be less useful than she thinks, but also the results of a failed test may not be so easily interpreted.

REFERENCES

- Held, Virginia. 1983. "The Validity of Moral Theories." *Zygon* 18 (June):167-81.
 Olby, Robert. 1974. *The Path to the Double Helix*. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press.
 Ross, W. D. 1930. *The Right and the Good*. London: Oxford Univ. Press.

BRAIN HEMISPHERICITY, MYSTICISM, AND PERSONAL WHOLENESS

by *Norma Tucker*

That mystics and victims of delusion share such sudden and passive states as an experience of abnormal significance, pseudohallucinations, a sense of mission, the suspension of time, and extremes of mood as discussed by Hermann Lenz (1983) is supported and partially explained by recent research in medicine and psychology. Such research also lends credence to his criteria for distinguishing between belief and delusion by the presence of hope and doubt, increased human freedom, and personal interaction among the mystics, with a corresponding absence of those qualities among the victims of delusions.

Neuroscientists and psychologists have begun to map brain activities, and a growing body of evidence demonstrates that each person has the capacity to use two major modes of consciousness: a logical, sequential, analytical mode, which is processed primarily, but not exclusively, in the left hemisphere of the brain; and an intuitive, synthetic, and holistic mode which develops insights primarily, but not exclusively, from the right hemisphere (Bogen 1969, Deikman 1971, Gazzaniga 1967, Grady and Luecke 1978, Lee et al. 1976, Ornstein 1977).

Norma Tucker is vice president for academic services, McPherson College, McPherson, Kansas 67460.

[*Zygon*, vol. 19, no. 1 (March 1984).]

© 1984 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0044-5614