



A Very Bad Wizard: Morality Behind the Curtain

Tamler Sommers

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Do we have free will? What counts as justice in the Peruvian Amazon? Is Catherine Zeta-Jones objectively hotter than Drew Barrymore? These are just a few of the questions that philosopher Tamler Sommers attempts to answer in far-spanning interviews with ten acclaimed researchers in the burgeoning field of moral psychology. Philip Zimbardo talks about his famous "Stanford Prison Experiment" and how it relates to abuses of Abu Ghraib. Harvard neuroscientist Josh Greene reports on the ways our brains react to ethical dilemmas. Jonathan Haidt explains why we object to incest and how that relates to disagreements between conservatives and liberals. Renowned Primatologist Frans de Waal juxtaposes human behavior with that of the bonobo (a species he terms the "hippie ape.") And much more. *A Very Bad Wizard* is essential reading for anyone curious about the origins and inner workings of our moral lives.

A Very Bad Wizard: Morality Behind the Curtain Details

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From Reader Review A Very Bad Wizard: Morality Behind the Curtain for online ebook

Nicole Cushing says

Description: A fascinating primer on the academic work that has been done (much of it empirical/experimental) regarding limits to human free will (presented in the transcripts of nine interviews the author conducted with academics investigating the question). Most of the interviews were previously published in the BELIEVER magazine.

The good:

1. The conversational interview format makes this topic a bit more informal and accessible than a standard approach. You get a sense of Sommers and the researchers as PEOPLE. It's especially helpful when Sommers takes the time to ask the scholars what practical effect their ideas have (or "should" have) on their own lives.
2. There's definitely sufficient grist for the mill to get the reader thinking about their own positions on the question of free will. The ideas presented in this book are challenging and potentially paradigm-shifting. It's not for the weak of heart -- and I mean that as a compliment.
3. I loved the "experimental philosophy" presented in the book, and this book whetted my appetite to learn more about how philosophers are testing their theories these days.

The bad:

1. There's an unfortunate "boys club" dynamic to Sommers conversations. Only one of the researchers interviewed was female (and she was sort of a "co-star" in an interview with a male researcher). Perhaps that's just the state of the free will field right now, but I think it compromises the (several) discussions the book includes with references to cultural differences vis a vis the morality of domestic violence, rape, the oppression of women and genital mutilation.
 2. Sommers and the academics he interviews (in particular, Stephen Stich) discuss differences in cultural norms over geographical space, but they totally ignore change in cultural norms WITHIN THE SAME GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE over the course of TIME. There have been HUGE changes in cultural norms in the United States in the relatively brief time from the 1950s to today (in regard to the taboo against premarital sex, in regard to gay and lesbian issues, in regard to the role of women). If culture is so important in defining morality, why did moral constructs change so quickly? Why are there people who emerge who hold a vastly different construct of morality within a society, which challenges the traditional notion? I found this to be a gaping hole in Sommers' book, and one that left me a little baffled.
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Sara Nowak says

It has potential, but for the three weeks I had it out of the library I only picked it up twice. Probably my fault b/c I've not been in a non-fiction frame of mind the past few years....Loved the interview though with the scientist who performed the prison study & determined that it is the situation which corrupts morally-just people, not the other way round. Put a good person in a bad situation and they will most likely make bad decisions. It changed the way I think about situations like Abu Ghraib and other abuses.

Zb1113 says

Great interviews covering topics like Free Will, Moral Responsibility, Situationism, Virtue Ethics, Utilitarianism, Intuitionist Morality, "Soft-Objectivity", Honor, Moral Nihilism, Primatology, Moral Relativism, Non-Cognitivism, Relational Model Theory, Moral Foundations Theory, etc. In many of these sections, Sommers pushes back hard against the arguments that his interviewees are making (except in cases of Honor).

Andrew says

This is a decent book. It's kind of McSweeney's guide to morality and evolution for people who live in San Francisco and ride a fixed-gear bike. And it does come with the requisite 'Thought-provoking and Entertaining' endorsement from Steven Pinker on the cover, so there's that. For lack of anything more substantive to say about the book, I will point out two things I learned from reading it:

- 1) I think the interview is a fantastic format for discussions of morality, consciousness and, to a lesser extent, evolution. It's very Socratic, and it makes the reader feel involved somehow.
 - 2) I don't give a shit about Determinism. I just don't think it's an interesting question, and I'm baffled as to why it's considered such a deep philosophical conundrum. I get it, if it's true we'll never really be able to say we're in control of our lives. But so what? Wine still tastes good and I still don't know the gender of the baby we're having this summer. Now let's say it's not true. Great! Either way...
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Chris Callaway says

Fascinating reading by some of the best people working in philosophy and the social sciences. It's like eavesdropping on a conversation between people smarter than you, and yet you're able to follow it. The format makes the ideas very accessible. The high point might be the interview with Philip Zimbardo, who conducted the (in)famous Stanford Prison Experiment.

LoRayne says

A philosophy book that starts with the idea that we don't have free will. This is actually quite the engaging

book employing a bit of sarcastic wit and great analogies for the layman. I'm not into this sort of thing usually, but I'm loving the interview format.

Mark says

did not enjoy this book. i anticipated the science of philosophy, i received the philosophy of scientists. and philosophers. i don't think this book has very much value to a reader who is not separately aware of (and critical of!) the theories in question, despite it being packaged as philosophy for a general audience. i was very intrigued by the idea of fMRI as a measure of morality, but i learned nothing about those tests. i learned a lot about what the person who ran the tests thinks about morality, though, which might be interesting to some readers but left me pretty disappointed.

Guchu says

Maybe 3.5

I take poorly to books in interview format. It makes me think about all the books I have read that took 5 years to write, juxtaposing them against said book which ostensibly only took a few sittings and a bit of transcribing. There are also some inherent limitations of interviews that I find incredibly time wasting in print since I'm a relatively slow reader (but not a slow listener lol); repetitions, the interviewer not understanding the question etc

Be as it may, this book posed some very interesting questions. Why is incest wrong? Is morality a social or evolutionary phenomena? Do animals feel a moral responsibility? Why are bonobos such a liberal and feminist society? Are we a naturally altruistic or egoistic species? Kantianism or utilitarianism?

I skipped a few pages towards the end where the topic was honour systems but overall this was a mostly fabulous read.

David says

The Q & A format used throughout works well - it led the reader through a kind of Socratic dialog, and illustrated nicely those questions for which the philosophers' own answers were still evolving. Sommers is generally astute as an interviewer, though his need to be liked sometimes gets in the way. (The whole enterprise was sponsored by "The Believer", so one assumes that the tone of upbeat niceness that prevails was an inevitable consequence).

For me, the best interviews were with Philip Zimbardo, Joseph Henrich's arguments that morality is intrinsically related to culture, so that there can never be any absolute standard of fairness, and Joerg Haider's view that moral values are arrived at through a combination of intuition and emotions, with reason having little to do with it.

As another reviewer has commented, Chapter 1 (we don't have free will, gasp!) ended up being a major letdown. I'm personally not all that interested in the morality of chimps, so Franz de Waal's contribution didn't do it for me. And the initially promising "trolley problem" chapter ended up going off the rails, right around the time the unfortunate term **meta-metaethics** was introduced.

Nonetheless, these essays were fun to read and live up to Steven Pinker's cover description: "thought-provoking and entertaining".

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This was recommended on some radio program or another, and so far it's entirely promising.

The focus? Morality

The format? Dr Sommers interviews ten "acclaimed researchers in the burgeoning field of moral psychology".

The format is actually a smart choice, as it allows Sommers to present ideas in a more freewheeling framework, rather than hitting us with little nuggets of predigested received wisdom.

Chapter 2: Hooray! It's got my good buddy Dr Philip Zimbardo.

Chapter 6: Trolley problems*. I *love* trolley problems!

* If you're not familiar with the genre, here are some representative examples:

A trolley is racing down the tracks, out of control, and will kill five unsuspecting workers, unless you act. You're standing at a switch that can divert the trolley to a second track, where there is only one unsuspecting worker. Should you flip the switch?

Well, duh. "A no-brainer", I hear you thinking.

Let's make things more interesting. What about this one?

Same trolley with the same dead conductor is barreling down the track, headed for the same five unsuspecting workers, but this time there is only one track. You are on a footbridge, looking down at the situation. In front of you is an unsuspecting fat man. You know that if you push the fat man over the bridge, his girth will be enough to stop the train, killing him but saving the five workers. Should you push the fat man over the bridge?

In both cases, your action saves five lives at the expense of sacrificing one. Why do you answer "yes" to flipping the switch, but "no" to flipping the fat man?

Erica says

This book was fascinating, and for that my rating should probably be higher. I found the discussions enlightening and entertaining, as advertised, and Sommers is very good at challenging each philosopher on

their inconsistencies and generating further speculation.

What I dislike is the tedious, casual sexism. From the question of whether Catherine Zeta-Jones is objectively hot proudly quoted in the book's official description, to the easy acceptance of belief systems that veil and restrict women, too many of these philosophers haven't done basic due-diligence on gender.

Other arguments skip over very obvious conditions or alternatives -- the idea that it's more utilitarian to treat all children equally skips over the fundamental problem that children only grow, thrive and become moral adults when they have the security of feeling special within their own families; another utilitarian argument that killing one healthy person to use their organs to save five terminally ill patients yields a greater utilitarian result skips over the obvious option of waiting for one to die and using their organs to save the other four, which is still ghoulish but at least doesn't require human sacrifice.

The interview format makes for an engaging read, but these concepts are intricate, and the interview format leaves the reader with ill-formed sketches rather than coherent arguments. On the other hand, it is short enough to read on a Thanksgiving weekend between cooking, hiking, managing children and whiskey-fueled debates with friends.

SB says

It's a good read, but the interviews can be hit-or-miss.

Frankly, it's better as a podcast.

Miles says

Solid introduction to some big questions in ethics for lay people. You'll certainly appreciate it more if you've got some academic background in ethics, or if you're reading it as part of a class. Makes a pretty strong case for antirealism. Examination of theories is a little shallow and may leave readers with the skewed impression that Kantianism, contractarianism, and moral realism are silly views that have been thoroughly debunked.

Timothy McNeil says

I am not only open to having my beliefs challenged, I welcome it. And Tamler Sommers (along with most of the interview subjects) wholeheartedly reject my mildly informed understanding of not only moral systems in philosophy but also moral development in regards to human psychology.

The problem is that Sommers is, to my mind, too silly and simple in his pursuit of this. Granted, this was not a scholastic or academic work, but Sommers did little to support his or his subjects attacks on the prevailing views. Worse, there is a thorough misunderstanding of Kantian moral theory (as well as its subsequent support network built by Kohlberg and Rawls) coupled to an equal misunderstanding of Mill's version of Utilitarianism. That was beyond frustrating.

As for the interview subjects, I was familiar only with Zimbardo (having read **The Lucifer Effect**). I found that particular interview to be somewhat meaningless without the knowledge I had from Zimbardo's book (but this is an obvious bias). In fact, the Stephen Stich interview is not only the most illuminating, it also serves to show the lack of proper understanding or preparedness Sommers seemed to bring to the project.

My low rating is, in part, due to my not liking what Sommers was trying to convey with book. I would like to think it is a tiny part, but I'm sure it is not. The larger issue was, however, that Sommers did too little to support his and others anti-Kant, anti-establishment (in regards to developmental psychology) position. Even were I to agree with this argument (and there is some level on which I have issues with where there are gaps or errors in the 'old thinking' that modern psychology is exposing), I would still want there to be support given rather than just having it decreed. Especially when just that way of conducting an argument is assailed by one of the subjects.

What I have gotten from this book is an idea that Stich is the one to be taken seriously. In order to properly evaluate Sommers I will have to go to his academic papers and then hope he answers the phone when I call his office.

Patrick says

An interesting series of conversations with scientists and moral philosophers, about sexy bonobos and the lack of free will, among other topics. I'm not entirely sure it hangs together as a coherent piece but it was an interesting meal that went down easy.

John Pappas says

Wild. With the interview format a seeming completely antithetical approach to "real" philosophy, I was skeptical. I was, however, proved wrong, as I found the interview format so much more dynamic than a prepared treatise...you get to witness philosophers thinking out loud, and that is something, despite the book's other flaws (lack of real depth, for example) that is irreplaceable. For those interested in ethics, metaethics and even meta-metaethics. A very readable treatment of important questions about the relativity of morality, justice and their import to our lives.
