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The Self and Its Emotions Kristjan Kristjansson Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 288 pp., $85.00 (hardcover)

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The Self and Its Emotions

KRISTJAN KRISTJANSSON

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Professor Kristján Kristjánsson's latest book weaves together an impressive philosophical treatment of the nature of the self and the emotions with a wide-ranging overview and critical appraisal of recent interdisciplinary research on selfhood and related topics (e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence, self-respect, and self-worth). Of interest to philosophers, psychologists, and educators, *The Self and Its Emotions* aims to "turn the tide of current self research" (p. 24) away from the now dominant anti-realist, cognitive-constructivist paradigm, according to which there exists no objective basis for determining the accuracy of self-ascriptions and, therefore, no useful distinction to be drawn between the notions of "self" and "self-concept." In place of this anti-realist paradigm, Kristjánsson recommends the adoption of a minimally realist, emotion-based alternative inspired chiefly by the thought of Aristotle and David Hume. For as Kristjánsson explains, "Emotions are not simply a part or an aspect of the self. They are not subordinate or subsidiary to some other cognition-dependent processes. Rather, emotions are the core and essence of the self" (p. 234).

Kristjánsson argues for his "alternative" paradigm for self research in a characteristically clear, accessible style, espousing its theoretical virtues and underscoring its practical significance throughout. He explains how the widespread acquiescence to postmodern denials of the self's reality has led to a series of related setbacks in self research, which have ultimately had an unfortunate impact on educational theory and practice, especially in the realm of moral education. A fantastic example, explored at some length in the book, is the now-defunct "global self-esteem" movement of the 1990s, which encouraged parents and educators to instill in each child the profoundly *un*realistic view that "I am great and can do anything!" Arguing from an Aristotelian perspective, Kristjánsson builds a convincing case for the educational value of realistic self-confidence, courage, domain-specific self-esteem, and proper self-respect.

Kristjánsson's "alternative" paradigm for self research places at center stage "a unified moral self of rationally grounded emotion" (p. 97) — a down-to-earth substitute for the overly intellectualized, disjointed selves of postmodern theory. As Kristjánsson explains, this unified moral self is creatively constituted by emotional activity, and its diverse modes of self-conceptualization are both derived from, and sustained by, evaluative forms of social recognition. Freed of the metaphysical baggage of traditional "hard" realist accounts of selfhood (i.e., those of Aristotle, Locke, and Descartes), his Humean "soft" realist account casts the self *un*mysteriously as an "everyday psychological unit, targeted by emotions" (p. 49). Kristjánsson recommends his Humean view as a minimalist starting point for establishing the objective reality of a moral self, for Hume sees the self as just "real enough to serve as the basis for practical self-understanding and self-criticism, and as the object of moral evaluation" (p. 47).

Kristjánsson's account of emotionally grounded selfhood preserves the common sense insights that the self is a unique entity of peculiarly moral concern, and that our conceptions of ourselves can be accurate only insofar as they are harmonized with some underlying reality, making contact with our actual, full-blooded selves. Given that we can sometimes be mistaken about ourselves, and even have a tendency to deceive ourselves

about who we are and what we are capable of, any account of the self should be able to explain these phenomena without simply casting them aside as illusory. Kristjánsson argues that anti-realist accounts have been unable to meet this basic theoretical requirement, giving us reason to favour a minimally realist view. While each chapter of the book revolves around the overarching theme of his "alternative" paradigm for self research, Kristjánsson delves into debates in a variety of different fields, showing carefully how each might be profitably informed by a renewed optimism for realism about the self. He begins by offering an in-depth analysis of the disputes between anti-self-realists and self-realists in philosophical and psychological circles, unravelling the merits and shortcomings of each approach before declaring that these debates have reached an impasse. Although narrative accounts of the self may seem to offer a promising way forward, Kristjánsson argues that they actually *exacerbate* the problem of choosing between anti-realism and realism. Indeed, there "seems to be something rotten in the state of self research" (p. 47) which might lead us to welcome a Humean alternative.

For those interested in contemporary moral psychology, Kristjánsson engages critically with post-Kohlbergian psychological research, touching on such fundamental issues as how psychologists and philosophers ought to be co-operating to develop a new research culture. After carefully laying out the strengths and weaknesses of the "psychologised morality" and "moralised psychology" approaches to interdisciplinary co-operation, he ultimately sides with a modest version of the latter, arguing that although moral psychology need not be prescriptive, "Moral psychological research does sit atop more fundamental theorizing" (p. 68). Kristjánsson advocates a fence-crossing process that preserves the best of what both philosophers and psychologists have to offer to the burgeoning field of moral psychological research.

Delving more directly into recent research in this area, Kristjánsson challenges the idea that the "moral gap" between moral cognition and action can be bridged by *either* moral emotions or moral selves in the wake of Kohlberg's declining influence, suggesting that his Humean view of emotion-grounded selfhood offers a promising way to reconcile these competing perspectives. He is also critical of recent attempts by moral psychologists to integrate cognition and affect (including the work of such psychologists as Jonathan Haidt), arguing that although these attempts may be post-Kohlbergian in spirit, they simply "do not depart far enough from Kohlberg's impoverished notion of the role of the affective in moral life" (p. 97), for they still cling too tightly to the misguided severance of emotion and reason.

The Self and Its Emotions is worthwhile reading for those who have been keeping an eye on debates between virtue ethicists and their skeptical, situationist critics. Kristjánsson also engages with those social psychologists and anthropologists who deny the existence of a cross-culturally uniform self-concept, hypothesizing the existence of two conceptually and practically incommensurable moral worlds. A self-proclaimed moral objectivist, Kristjánsson defends the epistemological thesis that humans can become acquainted with moral properties in a way that is independent of their particular culture-bound preferences, perspectives, or points of view, fending off several relativistic challenges that have recently been issued by social psychologists and anthropologists. He also defends the psychological thesis that humans are capable of forming intentions to honour moral properties, and of acquiring stable and robust dispositions to do so consistently over time and across contexts, countering several of the challenges of situationists, whose attempts to undermine the notion of moral character appear to come up

short. Regardless of whether we are card-carrying moral objectivists, Kristjánsson is keen to remind us that "[w]ithout moral character, there is no moral self" (p. 9).

Those who are sympathetic to relational accounts of the self (particularly as they have been developed by authors of a feminist persuasion) will wonder why Kristjánsson has not made much of an effort to engage with these theories, seeing as how they might profitably inform Hume's admittedly underdeveloped account of emotionally constituted selfhood. Philosophers of emotion and virtue ethicists will be intrigued when the author claims that "people's reactive attitudes to what they have done tend to be more stable than the actions themselves" (p. 22), and that "only an understanding of people's motivational structure can truly tell us whether they behave virtuously or viciously; and, moreover, whether or not they possess character in the first place" (p. 146). But they might also worry that by refocusing attention on allegedly stable dispositions to react emotionally, while also insulating people's motivational structures from behavioural analysis, recommending brain scans and hormonal analysis as alternative techniques of measurement (how exactly are emotions in general, and reactive attitudes in particular, to be individuated through the use of such techniques?), he might be not only protecting the notion of moral character from situationist critique, but also making it more generally difficult to impeach from an empirical point of view.

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