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### **Review of: Distributed Cognition and the Will: Individual Volition and Social Context, edited by Don Ross, David Spurrett, Harold Kincaid, and G. Lynn Stephens.**

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Conscious will and the question of whether it is an illusion have provoked a flurry of academic activity ever since Libet and the social psychologists spearheaded by Daniel Wegner started their furious attack on it, see e.g. recent collections by (Maasen, Prinz et al. 2003; Sebanz and Prinz 2006; Baer, Kaufman et al. 2008). So far, however, most of these books did not do much more than take notice of the challenge and worry about its possible implications for our traditional concepts of the will and responsibility. Ross's book goes one decisive step further. Rather than focussing on the challenge itself, Ross has assembled a truly magnificent combination of people who could form the foundation of an alternative constructive approach to what the will might be. Because of the impressive core of articles by Ainslee, Clark, Dennett, Petit and especially Thalos, this book is one that everyone should have on their shelf who believes, like I do, that we cannot ignore our new knowledge about how the mind works when we think about what the will is.

Nevertheless, the book does suffer from a couple of weaknesses which make an otherwise highly entertaining read less enjoyable than it could have been. But before presenting the reasons why I thought the book did not live up to its full potential, I would first like to take a look at the structure of the volume.

The rationale for the book is given by Ross in his very useful introduction. According to it, the will is really an old Cartesian concept intimately linked to the Cartesian self and Christian morality. Even today, Cartesian dualism, although not very popular in academia, is still at the heart of modern folk psychology. Even worse, modern naturalistic philosophers are still not free from the Cartesian influence. They do not talk about the will as a psychological entity any more, but, as Ross claims, the concepts used in understanding intentional action are still heavily influenced by the Cartesian account of the will. For a long time, this influence could go unchallenged, because we did not know enough about the human mind to disprove any reasonable folk psychologically informed position on the nature of the self and the will.

Ross goes on to say that with the vast advances in the cognitive sciences, this is now about to change. We now possess knowledge about the macro (like evolution) and micro (cognitive or brain) features that shape our behaviour. One of the most persistent myths that these new advances have exposed as such is the idea of the central controller self. The idea that such a central executive self must be in control of most of our intentional behaviours has been dominant not only in philosophy, but also until very recently in much of the cognitive sciences. But, as Ross writes, this paradigm has been blasted to ruins (page 6) by the much-cited empirical work of the scientists (see e.g. (Wilson 2002; Hassin, Uleman et al. 2005)) and by Dennett's philosophical prowess, which seems to show that conscious awareness is far less involved in the control of behaviour than has been traditionally assumed.

More importantly almost, and independent of the will and consciousness world, our understanding of the nature of cognition itself is nowadays very different from what it was like twenty years ago. Cognition is a rather more distributed affair than the Cartesian picture suggested. Ross uses especially Clark's work on embodied cognition and the extended mind to illustrate the claim that minds do not possess the sharp borders and strict hierarchical structures that the Cartesian picture suggested.

If the Clarkian picture is right, and if at the same time conscious will of the Cartesian sort is discredited in any case, then perhaps this is the right time to come up with a new understanding of the nature of volition that fits better with the Clarkian picture. At this point, Ross's last major protagonist, Ainslee, enters the stage. His account of willing as a sub-personal bargaining activity can explain many of the features we traditionally associate with willing, but at the same time it can combine perfectly well with a Clarkian understanding of the nature of cognition.

This, then, is the aim of the book in a nutshell: To explore conceptions of volition that make use of an extended mind picture of cognition: in other words, a book on embodied volition.

The idea of using all the revolutionary work on cognition of the last decades to understand the nature of volition is as simple as it is brilliant. It really is quite surprising that we have had to wait so long for somebody to come up with it. Luckily for us, the person who finally took it upon himself to collect important work in the area had an informed understanding of the important issues and players in the field.

Ross is strongest when he concentrates on what it says on the tin. We urgently need to move from a sense of wonder and surprise about the data provided by the likes of Libet, Wegner, and Bargh to new constructive ideas about what volition actually might be. Using the work of Clark and Ainslie as a starting point for doing just that seems like a very worthwhile idea. Especially the Thalos chapter offers some very valuable insights here. Clark provides us with a very rough sketch of an alternative model centered around soft selves and ecological control, but it is Thalos who spells out in detail what control could mean in this context. Her contribution really gives the reader a glimpse of what distributed accounts of volition might look like.

Not all is well in the book, however. Descartes is certainly a useful flag to orientate the discussion, but the sweeping claim that much of modern philosophy is in the grip of a Cartesian heritage is not really substantiated at any point, and seems to be little more than an empty gesture. It is not clear to me that there really is much living Cartesian philosophy or psychology of the will out there. But there certainly is a lot of contemporary philosophy on the will and on intentional action. Thus, what really is missing, especially in the introduction, are some thoughts on whether or not the ideas floated in this volume have anything to do with these contemporary debates. It is a shame that Ross has chosen to basically ignore the entire tradition in moral psychology and the philosophy of action that have been quite ingenious in providing us with contemporary accounts of free will and moral responsibility, e.g. Frankfurt and Watson, Bratman and Mele, Holton and Velleman. The debate out there is huge, but completely ignored by Ross, and it does not really feature very strongly in any of the contributions (perhaps with the exception of Thalos). Ross does not tell us why this tradition is not even mentioned in his introduction. This is even more of a shame because it is no longer true that the writers in these philosophical disciplines ignore the empirical sciences. Bratman, Holton, Velleman and Mele have all done work that engages quite directly with the neuroscientific challenges, and it would be important to bring this work into contact with authors that come from the philosophy of mind and cognitive science corner.

Now, obviously it is always a problem of anthologies like this that one feels one should include more, but has only limited space: still, this is not the only problem here. Rather, what is lacking is an attempt to locate the new approach within the existing intellectual landscape. Ross does include some work on the compatibilism/incompatibilism debate and he emphasises strongly that the work in this book is crucially important for a new understanding moral responsibility. But this only adds to the sense of frustration: The book's title promises us connections between very contemporary and fashionable accounts of distributed cognition and a grand old philosophical problem: the will. This certainly sounds very sexy, but what it delivers is rather less exciting. Critics might say that the book contains a lot of work on distributed cognition and includes some criticism of Cartesianism, but hardly engages at all with the will in the sense discussed by moral psychology, in spite of constant claims to the contrary.

What is more, the omission of the whole contemporary philosophical debate is not the only puzzling omission of the book. Even more surprising is the other body of work that is very underrepresented in the volume: There is not a word on all the excellent recent research in the cognitive sciences on the sense of agency. If we are interested in giving more empirically clued up philosophical accounts of the will, then it seems crucial to develop a better scientific understanding of the mechanisms behind our sense of agency and of the functions this sense may have. Ross seems to take Wegner as the undisputed truth here, but there is a huge and fascinating discussion out there that should not be ignored (e.g. in (Roessler and Eilan 2003; Pockett, Banks et al. 2006)). It is a shame that these discussions are not really mentioned, because they are an important part of what the book wants to be all about. Ross complains that the philosophy of the will ignores science, but by ignoring the controversy on Wegner's claims surrounding the sense of agency Ross is in danger of exhibiting an old philosopher's vice, i.e. taking notice only of the science that suits one's own philosophical convictions.

All in all, then, it is more what is absent from the book than any of its content that is unsatisfactory. This book provides one small part of the fascinating jigsaw of a new understanding of will and self in the age of science. It gives a colourful insight into one way of approaching the topic, but it is only a small part of the puzzle. After reading the book, many who are not sympathetic to the project in advance might have the feeling that it is not really about the will at all.

To show that this criticism is unfair, it is up to all of us to who are sympathetic to Ross's project to build on the first tentative steps Ross provides and to begin to engage these ideas not only with all the contemporary work that is done in analytical philosophy on the will, but also to engage more fully with the science of it. Nevertheless, even though a lot of work remains to be done Ross et al deserve great credit for providing such a fascinating collection that opens up many new and exciting ways of how to think about the will.

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