

MORAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Moral Theology at the Shifting Borders of Consciousness
Convener and Moderator: Kristin E. Heyer, Loyola Marymount University
Presenters: Sidney Callahan, The Hastings Center
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Sidney Callahan explored the moral implications of recent psychological research on nonconscious mental functioning or “the adapted unconscious.” Unlike the controlled, single system of consciousness, the adaptive unconscious is automatic, rigid, and concerned with the immediate. The adapted unconscious is thought to be inaccessible to direct conscious control because it has been selected and developed for instantaneous functioning, resulting in biases inaccessible to self-examination, for example. Emotional intelligence and social cognition also reflect these spontaneous and intense capacities and challenge conceptions of humans as solely rational, isolated units.

In light of such findings, voluntary intention becomes more ambiguous, as the line between fully self-aware action and ignorance becomes harder to discern amid the complex interactions and multileveled effects of different systems of consciousness. Callahan signaled implications for structural sins as well as the viability of holding people responsible for their “hidden” or “implicit” selves. She suggested that in addition to vulnerabilities and impairments that can arise from brain injuries, abuse, or neglect, a basic internal-external conflict between different human systems and motivations persists. She depicted the sinful “wound” in human nature as the inevitable conflicts between motives for survival and altruism, self and other, controlled and intuitive thinking, and immediate and long-term goals. Alongside innate desires for love and moral goodness, we encounter anxiety and lack of control that dispose humans to self-deception and aggression. While our social nature suggests an inner need for union and cooperative interdependence, it also makes us more vulnerable to group pressures to conform. Callahan argued that the core problem of human moral failure itself lies in this internal conflict and fragmentation. She concluded that the greatest fulfillment of humans, then, would be integration of all of these capacities, accomplished through the unity and transformation Christ brings.

Thomas Leininger discussed the interconnections between neuroscience, freedom, and moral dispositions. According to Carl Zimmer, we now live in a “neurocentric age.” Leininger argued that the field of neuroscience will increasingly become an important dialogue partner for moral theology. The question of whether and how we are free is crucial for this conversation. He argued Aquinas’s account of a moral *habitus* is well suited to identifying ways to gain leverage over the interactions between the brain and our moral freedom.

Neuroscientists estimate that between ninety-five to ninety-eight percent of brain activity is not fully conscious. For Aquinas most of what happens in the moral life happens in something like a moral “auto-pilot” mode that is set according to

firmly integrated qualities of character called moral dispositions. The key to influencing the continual feedback loop of mutual influence between conscious and unconscious activity is to build *moral momentum*. Moral dispositions establish particular patterns of moral momentum that continually reshape the mechanisms in us that act without our awareness.

Moral dispositions are ways that we carry forward our learning from our created nature, our community, and our own experience. Similarly, the basic building block of brain activity, the neuron, learns from the experience of its ancestors (via genetic instructions), its living neighbors (via neuronal ensembles), as well as from its own experiences (via the timing of electrochemical signals at the synapse). As neural impulses most often choose “the road most traveled,” repeated activity done for the right reasons and in the right way can become the preferred pathway for our freedom to travel.

Dispositions are considerably more complex than habits. A disposition coordinates the two central elements of a moral *habitus*: a) rational ability and b) firm inclination of a free will. The fact that the overwhelming majority of connections in the human brain stay within the brain seems to suggest that our brains are designed more for thought than for reflexive action. Aquinas argues that moral dispositions must be reflective rather than simply reflexive or instinctual. The complex way that the brain simultaneously processes the interactions between parallel brain activities allows for enormous adaptability and possibility combined with coherent order and stability. Moral dispositions equip us to manage the complexity of our moral freedom by enabling us to act in relatively stable ways while adapting to a variety of circumstances.

A Catholic, incarnational moral theology will find the operation of grace amidst the stunning complexity of our mostly unconscious neural activity. Leininger concluded that in Aquinas’s account of the theological virtues and the gifts of the Spirit one finds a profound spiritual acceptance of the vastness of our dependence upon transcendent processes beyond our full control. At the same time, it assumes that we can dispose ourselves to actively and meaningfully consent to and cooperate with forces far greater than ourselves.

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