

Adrian M. S. Piper,  
*Rationality and the Structure of the Self, Volume I: The Humean Conception*

Cambridge University Press Reader A

My overall impression is that this is a magnificent, deep, thorough, and ground-breaking (and ground-clearing) work. It takes on our (i.e., the Anglo-American) ruling philosophical and social scientific view of the self and action -- focusing on the self as rational actor and on (our accounts and understandings of) the grounds and causes of decision, especially evaluable decision. To give it three names: this is the belief-desire, the Humean (from David Hume), and the instrumental account of action and of the self.

One of Piper's arguments shows how these are three names of the same view. Far more significantly, she shows how very pervasive this view is: that it is held not only by those we know (and celebrate for) hold for holding and defending this view: e.g., utilitarians of various sorts, but also by many who have been taken as severe critics, offering alternative views. Among these last, she argues, are Nagel and, of all people, Rawls. To show this is not only "historically" important, showing what is or is not held by major philosophers, but also philosophically important, showing how seductive that view is, how even those who set out to criticize it (and have been taken by many to show it mistaken) fall back into it. Piper, it must be emphasized, does not show only that there is this falling back, but why there is.

These last points are strong and important. Of great importance, also – perhaps of more lasting importance – are Piper's very powerful arguments showing the ineliminable and deep defects of that view. She argues powerfully that the belief-desire, Humean, instrumentalist self and action are essentially arbitrary, even philosophically empty. This can be put another way: Aristotle argued that there are three goals (and sorts) of action – goodness (nobility), pleasure, and usefulness. Piper argues that that view is unable to make ultimate sense of, or allow for, the first, and only for the second and third, and moreover that its understandings of these last two are essentially arbitrary and indefensible as is its view of the self.

In brief, our ruling view is defective, even rotten, root and branch. Powerful and significant claims. Piper does not merely claim this, she argues extensively, thoroughly, and powerfully for them.

Is she right? Answering that would be as long and as difficult a task as the ones she set herself. But what I can say now is that she sets us this task (these tasks). Her arguments are, as I said, deep and important – and they are compelling. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain that view without answering Piper. The extensiveness (almost the relentlessness) of her arguments – both in regard to those philosophers she considers and also what she says about them – will (should) prevent us from thinking that she has, at most, identified localized problems that can be solved or at least evaded by simple or standard moves. (To adapt Lakatos: the needed monster-barring will, itself, become too monstrous to tolerate.)

I have already suggested that I think Piper is successful. I leave aside the question of whether she is right, beyond reply. Philosophers have replies to just about everybody. That's our job and our training. I mean, she is successful in showing the serious need to consider abandoning that ruling view – and embracing another one.

This latter task – embracing another one, showing what it is, defending it, and so on – is the promised concern of the second volume of this work, focusing on Kant and Kantian approaches to the self and action. I have read early versions of it and have found it as powerful as the first volume. The first volume, the one under review here, on its own merits publication. To publish only the first, without the second, would be a serious loss to philosophy.

“But that would double what is already far too long!” I can hear Cambridge saying perhaps with horror. I disagree about the first volume and indeed about the pair of them. Speaking now only about the first, with the exceptions noted below, nothing is out of place, repetitious, boring. All of the philosophers and the detailed examination of their various views are well worth considering. As a whole, the work will be indispensable and it will be indispensable as a whole. It can be seen as a presentation and recapitulation of a good part of a serious and seriously good philosophical (of a serious and seriously good philosopher's) life. One (Cambridge UP) could leave out this or that chapter. But why should it? It should only if the philosopher(s) in question should never have been considered important in the first place. But all of them have – and for good reasons.

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Who is the audience for this work? Just about every serious student (from undergraduate to professional) of ethics, self, and action. It could easily (and should) be the substance of many philosophy courses. It is, in brief, a critical history – and a history that will be critical for the understanding -- of the last several centuries of work in these fields.

Are there already other works (competitors) covering this material? Of course there are. But none do it as well or as thoroughly.

My overall view: Publish this (and the other volume) and be lauded. We will be seriously and deeply grateful to Cambridge University Press.

Thank you for letting me read this wonderful work. If I can be of further help in this matter, please do not hesitate to ask.