

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

Oxford University Press Reader A

This is an extremely ambitious project dealing with philosophical issues of first importance, especially against the backdrop of the emergence, within the latter part of the Twentieth Century, of rival constructivist views of moral theory—Kantian and Humean—and correspondingly rival views of the self upon which, as Prof. Piper argues, such moral views depended. The project is especially ambitious in that Prof. Piper proposes to develop her arguments in not just one, but in what she projects will be four separate volumes.

Now I have only read the first of these four parts, and I must, then, of course, do a lot of extrapolation. One of the questions posed to me was whether what I have read through could be treated as a “stand-alone” volume. I think the answer to this is, no. The first volume repeatedly refers to subsequent volumes for the full development of many of its points, and, indeed, constitutes merely half of a critical account of the Humean theory of the self and of metaethics, a critical account which is then to be completed by a much more positive account of the Kantian conception of the self, and Kantian metaethics. Moreover, the strategy of the whole is not to just reject the Humean account in favor of the Kantian, but to show that the Humean account is best incorporated into the Kantian account, albeit in a subordinate position. This being the overall project, treating this first (of four) parts as a distinct book would be to leave the reader with a very distorted sense of the author’s views.

Having said that, I realize, of course, that you will take on a lot to see this project through to completion. It may, of course, be possible to “package” the four parts in just two volumes: indeed, unless space considerations preclude this, I should think that this is what you should do: a volume on Hume and one on Kant. ✓

One very important contribution that this book makes is the synthesis it achieves of a very wide range of work. Ordinarily, one finds that authors who approach this topic are content either to focus on the relevant historical texts (from Hume and Kant), together with various more or less contemporary interpretations of these texts, or to approach the subject analytically, but with an emphasis on either contemporary work in action theory, or in moral theory (but rarely both). In this book all three perspectives are woven together—with extended discussions of the likes of Brandt, Kim, Goldman and David Lewis. Similarly, in Section IV, Prof. Piper seeks to survey not just the standard view of, e.g., Von Neumann and Morgenstern and Savage, but relate this to such alternative views as those of Allais, and also the distinctive viewpoint of Ramsey. As the footnotes in particular repeatedly make clear, Prof. Piper is in fact conversant with the full range of ideas and issues associated with expected-utility theory, as treated by philosophers, economists, psychologists and decision theorists. Her brief comments on what is to come make clear that the range of views to be explored will continue to be very extensive. I cannot think of any other work that manages to achieve such a synthesis of so many perspectives.

The discussion of (2) is really very interesting: this was one place in particular that I thought her analysis was very powerful, and quite original, particularly in respect to how it manages to tie together a number of negative themes that can be associated with the Humean belief-desire model of motivation. I will, however, concentrate my