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THE MORAL SCIENCE PRIMER

Psychology as the Science of Conflict Resolution

Albert Levis and Maxwell Levis

BOOK REVIEW Albert and Maxwell Levis, father and son, psychiatrist and psychologist, reevaluate the scholarly foundations of their professions.

Born in Greece in 1937 to a Jewish family, co-author Albert Levis spent his childhood in hiding during the Holocaust and post-war communist uprising, which claimed the lives of his father, grandfather, and other “good people” of Athens’ Romaniote Jewish community. This childhood trauma and firsthand experience with the bloodiest conflict in human history would shape his life’s work as a research psychiatrist dedicated to morality and conflict resolution.

Following his residency at Yale University in the 1960s, Levis wrote, across nearly half a century, a series of books on what he calls the “Formal Theory of Behavior,” which is “based on observing the creative process, the plot of stories, reflecting the unconscious, as a scientific conflict resolution phenomenon.” From this foundation, the book explores a wide variety of creative works, from Greek mythology and Jewish scripture to 20th-century novels, as it analyzes humanity’s approaches to conflict resolution.

Co-written with his son, Maxwell Levis, an ~~assistant~~ professor of psychiatry at Dartmouth’s Geisel School of Medicine, this work offers a primer on the intersection of Levis’ Formal Theory with the scientific underpinnings of morality, human creativity, and conflict resolution. The volume is divided into four separate “books,” framed by a multi-chapter introduction and conclusion.

Book one explores the scientific structure of the creative process, interpreting metaphors in myth and creative writing (including a lengthy analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*).

Books two and three center on more pragmatic issues of diagnosis and therapeutic assessment, citing case studies that are then linked to the *Oz* narrative.

The book’s final section makes the case for “morality as a scientific phenomenon,” arguing that “the unconscious is measurable” and that there is a scientific foundation for human religions.

While emphasizing the value of religion, the book also cautions that these systems of belief “should be humbled in their self-righteousness presenting themselves as the total truth.”

The text’s dense, jargon-filled prose does not make for a leisurely read, and is not made easier by the multi-book structure, which leads to repetition across the four sections. Its generous selection of full-color illustrations, reproductions of classical artwork, and a plethora of charts and diagrams, however, break up the book’s occasional monotony.

As an interdisciplinary work that focuses not only on the human mind but on history, literature, and religion, the book may appeal to a wide range of scholars, including anthropologists, literary critics, and psychologists. On the other hand, it risks overselling its status as a “groundbreaking” and “significant contribution” to “the field of social sciences,” given its relatively brief bibliography that heavily cites the Levis’ previous work and only a handful of studies published after 2010.

Though not all readers will be convinced by its lofty self-referential claims, the book does make a convincing case asserting that the current therapist/patient paradigm, guided by “medicalization and agnosticism,” would be well-served by new approaches. And while its extensive analysis of *The Wizard of Oz* works within the framework of its overall argument, that early-20th century work’s central role in the text may not resonate with 21st-century readers.

A thoughtful and humane, if prolix, reevaluation of human morality and the creative process.

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