On Structural Evil: Disengaging From Our Moral Selves

A Review of

*Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live With Themselves*

by Albert Bandura


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Reviewed by

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Albert Bandura is a legendary, celebrated figure in American psychology and one of the field’s most pivotal, foundational thinkers. In countless articles and numerous classic books, he has produced, among his many stellar contributions, an early and extremely influential conceptualization of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963), the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of behavior modification (Bandura, 1969), the social origins of aggression (Bandura, 1973; Bandura & Walters, 1959), the nature and importance of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and the interconnected social and cognitive bases of human thought and action (Bandura, 1986). Remarkably, especially in light of this staggering and inspiring oeuvre, Bandura’s most recent book, written as he was nearing his 90th birthday, may prove to be among his most broadly and publicly influential.

In a departure from most of his earlier scholarly work, Bandura’s intended audience for *Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live With Themselves* includes not only scholars and practitioners but also politicians, policy makers, and informed members of the general public. This is a risky undertaking, one in which lesser scholars and writers have foundered. Bandura manages it brilliantly, by seamlessly merging his encyclopedic grasp of relevant theory and data with an equally impressive mastery of countless historical and contemporary issues and anecdotes to illustrate his points. He has produced a timely and true psychological tour de force that addresses the scourge of modern times—organized, bureaucratized, institutionalized, and systematic violence; human degradation; and injustice in which large numbers of otherwise normal persons, perceiving themselves to be adhering consistently to a moral code, nonetheless engage in behavior that has disastrous consequences for the individual targets of their actions and for society in general.
Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Bandura is a self-described biological “potentialist,” in the tradition of Stephen Jay Gould, whom he cites early in the book, as one who believes that our biological “nature” places the transformative power of our social and cultural environment on no more than a “loose leash,” as opposed to a biologically deterministic “tight” one. Like Gould, then, Bandura consistently acknowledges the very real and important capacity of sociocultural variation and social contexts to shape and transform the manifestations of our common human nature. Like other “potentialists,” Bandura is committed “to establishing social conditions that promote personal development and societal change” (p. 21). On the other hand, Bandura also believes strongly in human agency, including moral agency. Indeed, his shift in terminology from his earlier formulation of “social learning” to “social cognitive theory” in his own theorizing about human thought and action and his path-breaking work on “self-efficacy” underscore the extent to which he subscribes to a model of human nature in which, under the right circumstances, people do exercise agency, are capable of self-regulating and self-censuring, and make choices, including moral choices.

Yet he remains acutely aware that “people do not operate as autonomous moral agents, impervious to the social realities in which they are enmeshed” (p. 10). Indeed, throughout his long and distinguished career, Bandura has deftly operated within, systematically theorized about, and insightfully interrogated—as well or better than any psychologist I know—the interstices between internal cognitive processes and external contexts and conditions. He is especially sensitive to and troubled by those social conditions that limit, interfere with, or compromise what he sees as the human potential for the positive, prosocial exercise of personal agency. Bandura recognizes that “almost everyone is virtuous in the abstract,” but the marked differences in ethical behavior are all too often produced by the mechanisms of moral disengagement that impinge “under the conditional circumstances of everyday life” (p. 37).

Bandura began conceptualizing, writing about, and applying the concept of “mechanisms of moral disengagement” more than a quarter century ago, as an outgrowth of his thinking about moral agency and the specific contexts, practices, and procedures that operate to undermine or neutralize genuinely moral thought and action (Bandura, 1986, 1990). He used it first to explain the perpetration of broad “inhumanities” against others (Bandura, 1990, 1999), and he and other scholars and researchers employed it subsequently to further our understanding of phenomena as diverse as people’s reactions to and support of war (e.g., Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006); school and cyberbullying (e.g., Runions & Bak, 2015; Thornberg & Jungert, 2014); delinquency, aggression, and prison gang activity (e.g., Shulman, Cauffman, Piquero, & Fagan, 2011; Wood, Moir, & Jame, 2009); sexual harassment (e.g., Page & Pina, 2015); unethical decision making (e.g., Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008); performance-enhancing drug use (e.g., Boardley, Grix, & Dewar, 2014); and the tolerance for inequality (e.g., McAlister, 2010).

Bandura is known for the systematic, concise, and elegant way that he theorizes and empirically supports the topics on which he works. Moral Disengagement is no exception. The conceptual framework on which he premises the analyses and applications that follow is presented in a careful, logical fashion in the book’s opening chapters. Bandura explains that mechanisms of moral disengagement are directed at different loci or points in the causal
process from act to immoral consequence. The locus of disengagement can include the morally questionable or inhumane behavior itself, one’s agency in enacting it, the consequences or effects of the actions taken, and the nature and status of the victims against whom the hurtful behavior is directed. Specifically, at the behavioral locus, people who engage in harmful and hurtful conduct regularly cloak their behavior in legitimate-appearing justifications that not only neutralize self-sanctioning but also often elevate the behavior into something seemingly noble. That is, “with commitment to the justness of the cause, [even] killing becomes an act of heroism” (p. 49). Similarly, describing one’s actions in euphemistic language can sanitize, denature, and obfuscate their immoral qualities because it “numbs us to unpleasant and harmful realities” (p. 54). Behavior that is otherwise odious or morally suspect also can be made to seem more palatable by making advantageous comparisons to actions taken by others (including but not necessarily limited to the targets of one’s own harmful acts) or to actions that one could have taken, but did not, that are even more repugnant than the ones actually employed. Thus, “skillfully framing an issue . . . can make the lesser of two evils not only acceptable but even morally right” (p. 56).

Other mechanisms of moral disengagement are directed at minimizing the level or degree of agency that can be attributed to the individual actor or decision maker, including displacing responsibility, so that one’s own role as the actual cause of the harm is made to seem minimal or nonexistent (e.g., “I was just following orders,” in the case of lower-level functionaries who carry out the harmful behavior, or maintaining “plausible deniability” for those who provide its implicit or indirect authorization). A similar kind of moral disengagement occurs through the closely related mechanism of diffusing responsibility, either through group decision making, in which “the faceless group becomes the agent” of the action (p. 62); the division of labor, which assigns people to perform only a discrete, routinized, and seemingly harmless component of a fragmented sequence of actions that culminates in significant harm; or by engaging in collective actions that increase anonymity and correspondingly decrease concerns over adverse social evaluation.

Mechanisms of moral disengagement are also often directed at the effects or consequences of the harmful acts, by ignoring or disregarding the effects, distorting them in ways that minimize their magnitude or harmful nature, or simply by directly disputing the fact that they have occurred at all. As Bandura puts it, “Without adverse effects there can be no moral predicament” (p. 69). Sometimes an array of internal cognitive processes is enlisted to reconfigure and discount the realities of the harm that one’s actions have brought about. These processes include selectively attending to outcomes in ways that ensure that their worst aspects are never perceived, construing the consequences to minimize their damaging nature, or engaging in selectively remembering that omits most or all of the damage one has wrought. In addition to cognitively reconfiguring the harmful consequences of damaging or inhumane acts, technology has extended the reach of certain kinds of behavior and distanced us from the outcomes produced, making the connection between certain acts and consequences more remote and easier to ignore or minimize. Modern mechanized warfare and electronic communications technologies alike allow “transgressive acts” to be “performed privately and anonymously against depersonalized or faceless victims located thousands of miles away” (p. 68).

Morally disengaging mechanisms can be directed at the victims of one’s inhumane or destructive actions. Dehumanization strips the targets of mistreatment of their human qualities—precisely the qualities that would otherwise engender empathy and compassion.
Sometimes this is accomplished through the use of derisive labels or caricatures that invest the targets of abuse with subhuman, even demonic characteristics. As Bandura observes, “Once entire classes of people are rendered less than human, their stigmatization, persecution, and exclusion from the most basic human rights becomes personally and social acceptable” (p. 88). In a related way, depersonalization involves regarding the persons who are victimized by morally questionable, harmful behavior with a level of detachment and indifference that is ordinarily reserved for inanimate objects. “Things” do not suffer and are therefore easier to mistreat than people. Finally, blaming the victim or asserting that victims are responsible for their own demise is a mechanism that operates to absolve perpetrators for the suffering they have inflicted. In this way, the targets of abusive treatment are thought to “deserve” it or to have brought it on themselves.

Moral disengagement is an individual-level process—in the final analysis, it is people who act and who must grapple cognitively and emotionally with the moral implications of what they have done. Accordingly, as I have noted above, Bandura carefully parses the various psychological mechanisms by which this dilemma—maintaining one’s self-perception as a decent, moral person while, at the same time, engaging in behavior that would otherwise be judged as destructive, inhumane, and immoral—is seemingly resolved. But, as I also noted earlier, Bandura is equally interested in the broader, external, “macro” influences on these internal processes—the various practices and policies that are deployed within organized social settings, institutional contexts, and economic and political systems to help to initiate, facilitate, and maintain collective forms of violence and large-scale inequalities and injustices. Of course, Bandura is a psychologist, not a sociologist, political scientist, or political economist. Appropriately, then, he refrains from explicitly addressing the issue of exactly whose interests are served by the structurally generated violence, injustice, and inequality that these mechanisms of moral disengagement are enlisted to help create and defend. But he is unsparing in his analysis of how they operate and with what consequence.

To take a particularly ironic and paradoxical example with which I am intimately familiar and that is especially relevant to current domestic policy debates, consider the punitive transformation of the American criminal justice system over the past four decades. Of course, no one would dispute the necessary and rightful power of the state to punish wrongdoers and sometimes to punish them severely. However, since the mid-1970s, our nation’s criminal laws, prisons, and jails have moved far across the line that divides effective but humane crime control from outright punitive excess. Thus, decisions were made, policies devised, and practices carried out that were intended not only to punish—to inflict pain—but to do so with ever increasing severity, with little real regard for their social, economic, and human consequences (Haney, 2006). We have been left with a vast, enormously expensive prison system whose sheer size is historically unprecedented—at no time in the past has our nation incarcerated its citizens at remotely the rate that we reached over the past four decades—and which established us as punitive outliers in the world—our rate of incarceration is by far the highest on earth, dwarfing that of the other democratic nations with whom we regularly compare ourselves. Beyond the sheer numbers of persons incarcerated, we adopted and employed a host of questionable practices that were clearly intended to “hurt” those persons on which they were inflicted. Indeed, a vigorous “penal harm” movement emerged during these decades in which lawmakers competed with one another over finding “creative strategies to make offenders suffer” (Cullen, 1995, p. 340). Among other things, those strategies included subjecting what is currently estimated to be approximately 100,000 persons in the United States who are now housed in solitary or isolated confinement, many of whom are known to be mentally ill but who are nonetheless
forced to live virtually around-the-clock under conditions that place them at significant risk of even more serious psychological harm (e.g., Haney, 2003). Particularly because the panoply of harsh prison sanctions were knowingly directed at populations of prisoners that included significant numbers of clearly vulnerable persons, such as juveniles and the mentally ill, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they were intended to do real damage or, at least, were imposed without any real attempt being made to avoid it. In fact, in the case of solitary confinement, many prison systems continue to vigorously employ it in degrees and with certain groups of prisoners that place them directly at odds with various human rights, legal, and professional mental health organizations (e.g., American Bar Association, 2010; American Psychiatric Association, 2012; American Public Health Association, 2013; United Nations, 2011), leading some commentators to raise ethical questions about the propriety of medical and mental health professionals participating in these harmful practices (Metzner & Fellner, 2010).

I characterize this turn of events as ironic and paradoxical because, of course, the very system on which we as a society depend to uphold a common morality, reinforce moral behavior, and sanction moral transgressions lost much of its own moral compass, gratuitously inflicting pain and doing damage, with little consideration for the targets of those morally questionable actions. As a New York Times editorial observed, we have lived in an era when “American sentencing policy has been driven by irrational, fact-free scare mongering” and in which “four decades of extreme sentencing policies have deadened the public’s sensitivity to what five years behind bars means, let alone 25 or more” (“Toward Saner,” 2015, p. 8). As a National Academy of Sciences committee on which I served observed, the nation’s criminal justice system over these decades “failed to assure that punishments were no more severe than was necessary to achieve their aims” (National Research Council, 2014, p. 322), and it urged us to return to “principles of restraint [to] curb the rush to punish by appealing to ideas of fairness” (p. 323). In addition, the U.S. Supreme Court was forced to remind the nation, and the nation’s prison systems, that prisoners not only have constitutional rights that may not be abridged but also that they “retain the essence of human dignity inherent in all persons” (Brown v. Plata, 2011, p. 1928).

I believe that mechanisms of moral disengagement help to explain why and how we could have followed this destructively punitive path for so long. I have addressed some of these mechanisms as they operate on a more focused, day-to-day basis, on functionaries and decision makers within various parts of the criminal justice system itself (e.g., Haney, 1997, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015), and Bandura addresses a number of them as well in his excellent chapter on capital punishment. But mechanisms of moral disengagement have been operating at much broader policy levels, facilitating the overall punitive path on which the nation has been traveling virtually uninterrupted for decades now. Overarching justifications (e.g., “deterrence,” “containment”) were used to rationalize harshly punitive practices, absent any real empirical evidence that they could or would accomplish their intended goals, and certainly not that they were more effective in doing so than a host of less damaging alternatives. Euphemistic terms (e.g., “three strikes” laws, sentencing “enhancements,” “truth-in-sentencing” legislation) were used to describe laws that inflicted shockingly long prison sentences on unprecedented numbers of people. Advantageous comparisons were used to justify even the harshest punishments because, proponents said, they were less egregious than the worst crimes for which perpetrators were being punished. Responsibility for overly harsh punishment and damaging treatment was displaced by legislators (who claimed only to be giving “the people” what they were demanding), judges
The Overarching Threat of Moral Disengagement in Our Times

Even scholars and researchers like myself who are conversant with Bandura’s earlier writing on moral disengagement and have relied on it in our own work will be enlightened by his latest book’s skillful and insightful applications to a host of critically important contemporary social problems and controversies. Thus, after his especially careful and thoughtful
discussion of moral disengagement concepts—by far his most extensive to date—the remainder of the book is devoted to applications and illustrations of these mechanisms at work in a staggering array of historical examples (that nonetheless have contemporary relevance) and others that are drawn directly from current, pressing controversies. Along the way, Bandura illuminates and unpacks a number of thorny philosophical, psychological, and moral issues and also offers, either explicitly or implicitly, a number of thoughtful prescriptive solutions. His goal is “not to excuse or condone the conduct being analyzed” but instead to use scientific knowledge to inform his audience on “how to prevent and counteract the suspension of morality in the perpetration of inhumanity” (p. 48).

Despite his unparalleled accomplishments, Albert Bandura has remained ever dignified and modest—in person and in print—throughout his career; his narratives are never about him but rather address the intellectual issues and social problems at hand. However, in Moral Disengagement, he does allow himself one fascinating and unsettling personal account of the pummeling that he endured earlier in his career, when his research on the effects of media violence incurred the wrath of the entertainment industry. As he recounts it, he was subjected to targeted attacks from industry spokespersons, paid consultants, and other media-commissioned critics who questioned not only his data and the interpretations he gave them but also, by implication, his integrity and scientific bona fides. As he says, “I began to feel a kinship with the battered Bobo doll” (p. 134). Of course, Bandura emerged from these battles with his reputation entirely intact (and, if anything, enhanced by the steadfast stance he maintained). But the anecdote reminds us that he is obviously not at all naive about what can happen when scholars speak unadorned truth to entrenched power, as he does here, repeatedly and at length. In this way, this latest book represents an act of genuine courage, even beyond the sometimes intellectually iconoclastic stands with which he has been associated in the past. Bandura is, of course, the consummate scientist, with a truly impeccable reputation as a researcher and theoretician. This is the stance he embraces and the one from which he opines throughout Moral Disengagement, as he nonetheless engages directly and deeply with many of the most significant moral and political issues of our time.

In fact, Bandura devotes entire chapters to categories of real-world immorality, injustice, and inhumanity, addressing them in depth rather than in passing, with multiple examples of how and why they have occurred in the past and, in many instances, continue to plague modern society. For example, he examines how entertainment industry executives and operatives resolve the moral dilemmas brought about by their own companies’ obsession with and exploitation of graphic violence despite its increasingly well-documented harmful societal effects. He moves on to describe and analyze several major cases of scandalous corporate wrongdoing (including the mortgage crisis and subsequent global financial meltdown). Bandura writes, correctly in my view, that these recurrent corporate crises “are systemic moral failings, not just systemic financial failings” (p. 237), that they are “not the work of [only] a few unprincipled offenders and functionaries” (p. 251), and that the organizationally supported ethos of “reckless ambition” virtually guarantees that, absent a host of significant morally engaging interventions, there will be future financial crises. In other industries, Bandura notes, the corporate climate of moral disengagement also facilitates the production of dangerous products (such as cigarettes) and toxic chemical residues (including lead, vinyl chloride, and silica and coal dust) that represent significant threats to health and well-being. In particular, the morally disengaging practices of providing overarching justifications (usually couched in economic terms), minimizing or
denying any harmful effects, and blaming negative outcomes on the personal shortcomings or failings of the victims are used to psychologically justify the morally unjustifiable.

In another chapter, Bandura argues that terrorist violence is characterized by the fact that it is directed at civilians and at civilian infrastructure with the goal of forcing changes in the nature, identity, or operation of the targeted political regime. The fear-generating nature of terrorists acts is maximized through the high degree of unpredictability and lethality with which they are carried out, the near impossibility of protecting oneself from such an attack, and the broad-based nature of the harm that occurs when targeted centralized systems that provide essential services are disabled. Unlike other groups engaged in harmful, destructive behavior, most terrorist groups openly claim responsibility for the horrible consequences of their acts, rather than minimizing or denying what they have done. Instead, the moral disengagement in which they engage typically occurs in the form of overarching justifications for their actions and through blaming and dehumanizing their victims. However, as Bandura notes, many terrorist perpetrators “invoke moral standards to justify their brutal deeds but selectively disengage those standards when they actually carry out such activities” (p. 335). He explicitly acknowledges that much the same can be said about many counterterrorism activities, which also are susceptible to morally questionable excesses, in which perpetrators employ morally disengaging mechanisms to avoid self-censure and political censure. He ends an intensely fact-based discussion of the twists and turns of American counterterrorism policy by arguing in favor of an approach that examines terrorism’s “root causes” and addresses “the life conditions that drive people to take up deadly terrorist missions” in the first place (p. 371).

In the final chapter, Bandura analyzes global climate change and environmental sustainability—what he terms “the most urgent issue facing humankind in this century” (p. 372). After an in-depth discussion of morally disengaging aspects of the problem, including the way harmful environmental policies and practices are justified by investing them with seemingly legitimate purposes, cloaking them in “sanitized, convoluted, and innocuous language” (p. 399), and discrediting the substantial scientific evidence that has mounted documenting their harmful consequences, Bandura begins to construct a decidedly hopeful narrative, one in which the skillful, directed, and humane use of electronic communications, social media and social modeling, and applications of what he calls the “entertainment-education” system can be employed in ways that broadly promote an awareness of and commitment to environmental sustainability. The components of this project would include elevating literacy levels and family planning practices worldwide, as well as enhancing a sense personal and collective efficacy across the globe.

Conclusion

_Moral Disengagement_ is a “must” read; however, despite the very clear, accessible level at which it is written, it is not an “easy” read (and should not be). Bandura is unsparing in his accounts and unrelenting in the sheer number of examples and level of detail he provides in documenting the widespread and dangerous instances of moral disengagement at work. It is a kind of psychological (and, given the nature of the issue at hand, unavoidably political!) call to action about the breadth, depth, and power of the corporate, governmental, and organizational systems that provide the means and mechanisms as well as the motivation to morally disengage us from our better selves.
Notwithstanding the sobering, extended analysis Bandura has provided of mechanisms of moral disengagement and the political and economic systems, structures, policies, and practices that devise and implement them, he does end on an uplifting note and offers a positive, progressive, and inspiring vision of a possible future. He expresses his sincere hope that a deeper appreciation of the inextricable “connectedness of consequences” throughout the world will serve to unite rather than divide diverse groups and interests and that “the extraordinary power of humanization” can be effectively harnessed to “curb inhumane practices.” Despite—and perhaps because of—what he knows about the panoply of insidious mechanisms at work in the world to disengage us from our moral compass, people, he tells us, really “cannot persuade themselves to behave cruelly toward humanized others despite strong pressure to do so” (p. 446). The key to withstanding that strong pressure, of course, is to use the kind of knowledge that Bandura has imparted, knowledge that can and should be used to intellectually deconstruct and proactively resist the mechanisms that he has carefully dissected, with an awareness of our common humanity always kept at the forefront of our thoughts and actions. We are indebted to him—in this book and throughout his career—for this powerfully stated clarion call and for providing the intellectual tools and inspiration with which to heed it.

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