Virtually everyone lies some of the time, goes a few miles over the speed limit while driving, or jay walks while crossing a street. It is easy to see how people can live with themselves after committing such minor peccadilloes. But how do people live with themselves who torture or behead prisoners, who press buttons for drone attacks that kill innocent people as “collateral damage,” or advertise the cigarettes that will send millions more people to early graves? If you could never quite figure this out, you’re not alone. So many of us read or hear the news and ask ourselves “How can people do such a thing?” This book explains how they do it. And, of course, Albert Bandura is not just talking about others unlike ourselves. Psychologists regularly find themselves in morally challenging situations, some of which they handle well, others, not (Sternberg & Fiske, 2015).

Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live With Themselves can be an emotionally heavy and challenging book, so before I say more about the book, permit me to interject one lighter note. When I was a child, I used to watch the Sandy Becker Show (and the chances are that unless you were born before 1960 and lived in the New York metropolitan area, the show was not in your repertoire). The only thing I remember Sandy saying is “Whatever goes up, must come down.” When I was older, I learned that Sandy was referring to the principle of gravity. But the principle also seems to apply to people’s reputations in scientific work: As Dean Simonton (2004) has pointed out, career contributions tend to show an upward trajectory from early to middle years, only to peter out in the later years. Our career contributions can look depressingly like a normal curve, in which we may hope, at best, the curve will be left skewed, dropping down only at the very end of our career. Bandura seems to defy all such likely career curves. Here is a scholar writing what I believe is his best and possibly most influential book at the end of his career. Offhand, I can think of only one other example of a magnum opus written in retirement: John B. Carroll’s (1993) Human Cognitive Abilities. What is even more extraordinary in Bandura’s case is that . . . he is 90 years old. Is anyone reading this review planning to do a magnum opus at age 90? One would have thought that, by regression effects alone, the
most cited scholar in contemporary psychology (Diener, Oishi, & Park, 2014) would illustrate that, sooner or later, whatever goes up, must eventually come down. Not, apparently, in Bandura’s case! His already top-of-the-mountain reputation will be greatly enhanced by this magnificent work, showing that whatever goes up, can still keep going up.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The main argument of the book is in Chapter 2, “Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement.” This chapter shows how good and not so good people can commit heinous acts and live with themselves. Chapter 1, “The Nature of Moral Agency,” sets the stage for the book by describing just what moral agency is and how it plays a role in our lives. And then Chapters 3–8 apply the mechanisms described in Chapter 2 to six different enterprises: the entertainment industry (Chapter 3), the gun industry (Chapter 4), the corporate world (Chapter 5), capital punishment (Chapter 6), terrorism and counterterrorism (Chapter 7), and environmental sustainability (Chapter 8).

With models such as Bandura’s, the question that often arises is whether the models work in multiple domains, or really, even in one domain, or whether they are “theoretical psychology” divorced from real-world behavior. The six application chapters of Bandura’s book make clear that the model not only works across domains, but that it robustly explains behavior that would, in any domain, seem to many of us to be inexplicable.

We all know, from classic studies such as those by Milgram (2009) and Zimbardo (2008), that good people can be placed in situations that lead them to do really awful things. What has been missing before is an explanation of the mental mechanisms that lead people to do these things. We know, for example, that people will be obedient to evil government authorities: But how do they keep doing bad things, again and again, and then go home and be nice to their families and sleep well at night?

In Chapter 2, Bandura argues that there are four loci of moral disengagement: behavioral, agency, effects, and victim. Consider each in turn.

The behavioral locus refers to harmful behavior being turned into supposedly good behavior. Three mechanisms operate at this locus. Moral, social, and economic justification occurs when people justify their actions morally, socially, or economically. For example, “God demands that I kill these people”; or “the survival of our country depends on our exiling these people”; or “these people have hoarded all the resources and enriched themselves at everyone else’s expense, so they deserve what we are doing to them.” Euphemistic language refers to ways of sanitizing killing and other harmful acts; examples are “collateral damage,” “servicing a target,” and “surgical strikes.” Advantageous comparison occurs, for example, when one refers to harmful acts as “the lesser of two evils,” or when those committing grossly violent acts point out that the “American Revolution was violent too.” Or the gun industry might argue that even more lethal weapons are important for individuals to defend themselves against increasingly well-armed criminals and terrorists.

The agency locus refers to displacement or obfuscation of blame regarding who is responsible for harmful acts. Two mechanisms are key at this locus. Displacement of responsibility refers to the minimization of one’s role in harm or the displacement of the blame onto others. For example, a government-employed torturer or killer might refer to himself as simply following the orders of his higher-ups. (I use the male pronoun here because the agents are usually, but certainly not always, men.) Diffusion of responsibility refers to widespread sharing of blame, such as when an employee of a concentration camp
(itself a euphemism) or a particularly awful prison points out that he played only the most minor role in the goings on of the institution.

The effects locus refers to attempted explanations for effects. The main mechanism is **disregard, distortion, and denial of harmful effects**. For example, the agent of harm may deny that people were seriously harmed, or say that the punishment actually was good for the individual because it toughened him up. Moral disengagement by observers of harmful practices, like by practitioners of harmful practices, can also occur at this locus. The observers simply disregard, distort, or deny awful acts by others. Bandura shows, for example, how higher-ups in the Catholic Church tolerated abuse of children and moved offending priests around, thereby allowing them to carry their abuse from one milieu to another.

The victim locus refers to attempts to displace blame onto the victim. There are two main mechanisms. **Dehumanization** occurs when one views the victim as, say, a lower animal—a cockroach or some form of vermin—an animal that one might step on and feel like one actually did a good deed. **Attribution of blame** occurs when one blames the victim—“she asked for it” or “he made me do it to him.”

The strengths of this book are almost too many to cite. Here are a few.

First, the book is unique in its comprehensive and compelling account of moral disengagement. The book powerfully explains how people can act in horrible ways. For those who have wondered how even seemingly good people could do terrible things, the book is a unique sourcebook for understanding bad behavior, regardless of from whom it comes. The book helps us understand not only moral disengagement, but also how humans can act in ways that are evil (Baumeister, 1999) and hateful (Sternberg, 2005; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008).

Second, whereas with some research, one ends up wondering whether it applies outside a laboratory or other controlled setting, with this research, there is no doubt. Bandura shows across six domains (actually more if one counts the many exemplars in the book that occur before the latter chapters) how people act in awful ways and often feel good or, at least, not bad about it.

Third, the book shows how it is possible to understand awful human behavior without subjecting participants in experiments to deception or even questionable behavior on the part of experimenters. Sometimes, experiments of dubious ethical provenance have been defended as necessary to understand the seamy side of human nature. In contrast, Bandura’s analysis in *Moral Disengagement* did not involve his deceiving or poorly treating even one subject.

Fourth, the book, although drawing largely upon the kind of case-study method made famous by Irving Janis (1972) in *Victims of Groupthink*, also draws heavily upon laboratory work, especially Bandura’s (1976) research on the powerful effects of modeling. So the book, although based largely on case studies, is actually wide-ranging in the methodologies from which Bandura draws his conclusions.

Fifth, Bandura’s book is an easy read. Bandura’s writing is not the kind you would encounter in trade books by authors such as Steven Pinker (e.g., Pinker, 2007) or Daniel Gilbert (e.g., Gilbert, 2007), and it is hard to imagine jokes or light rhetorical devices as being
appropriate in this book. However, the book is easy to read and understand and compelling in its narrative.

Sixth, Bandura reveals just how purposefully individuals in some industries, such as entertainment or food or tobacco, have gone about their business acting in ways that ultimately destroy people’s lives. At the same time, he reveals how these people can go home and feel good, or at least not particularly bad, about what they have done. (“Our guns will enable us to fight against the government in case it goes just too far in encroaching upon individual liberties!” “People should be free to eat or drink whatever they like, without Big Brother telling them what to do!”)

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the book should give hope to those of us in late career that even at the tail end of a career, it is possible to write a magnum opus that will change the face of psychological theory and research. This is a book that would have been a tour de force at any stage of one’s career.

Every book has challenges. This is one of those books that challenges me, as a reviewer, to figure out just what the challenges might be (an unusual position for me to be in, having reviewed many books in my day—I have even served as editor of *Contemporary Psychology*, a journal of book reviews and the paper predecessor of *PsycCRITIQUES*)!

First, any book based largely on case studies is subject to the criticism that the analysis of the case studies reflects, at least in part, the author’s preconceived agenda. People who are progun or procapital punishment, or who have a higher tolerance for environmental costs of development than does Bandura, for example, might have a very different take on the evidence that Bandura presents. My sympathies are largely (although not always) with Bandura, but I have lived in states (Oklahoma and Wyoming) where many people have views very different from mine (and Bandura’s) regarding what constitutes moral behavior, and one has to be careful about dismissing views that might seem morally disengaged to oneself, but morally engaged to those who hold them. We live in a society that is very polarized in terms of its views of what is moral, and almost any debate, such as one on abortion (or guns or capital punishment), can easily end up with each side viewing the other as morally disengaged and then citing evidence it finds convincing to support its point of view.

Second, the case studies, although important to the book, can become somewhat repetitive. By the end, I found myself thinking at times “OK, I get the point!” I believe the case studies are important for showing the domain-generality of the points in the book, but after a certain point, one may feel like the points have been made, again and again. This is an issue for me, as I would like to use the book as a secondary text in an ethics course I teach. But I wonder whether students will have the patience to make it through all of Chapters 3–8. I might use only portions of these chapters. Nevertheless, from a scholarly point of view, the book would have been a weaker one had Bandura failed to show the broad generality of his proposed mechanisms of moral disengagement across such diverse domains.

Third, the book perhaps does not pay as much attention as it might to the question of whether moral disengagement might sometimes have adaptive functions. For example, soldiers have to live with awful things that happen, whether purposely or by mistake. When they conduct bombing missions, for example, innocent people will die. Any fighting can bring in casualties of the innocent. Yet, as Edmund Burke pointed out, unless the good
sometimes fight for what they believe is right, evil may triumph. Sometimes good people, in trying to do good, harm innocent people. Is moral disengagement perhaps necessary for them to survive in seeking the good of the many? I don’t know the answer. I just know that the question deserves serious consideration. Individuals in the military must deal with this question on a regular basis, and so, probably, must we all at some points in our lives.

Finally, a minor quibble with the biography on the rear cover—at least of the proof edition I was sent—: The biography refers to Bandura as “one of the most eminent psychologists of modern times.” I believe that, by any reasonable standard, he is the most eminent.

For me, it would be hard to find a book of more contemporary relevance than Moral Disengagement. It will prove to be a classic in the field of psychology, and it is obligatory reading if we are seriously committed to understanding the confusing world in which we live. If you read it and find you better understand how other people can do such bad things and lived with them, you will have profited from the book. But if you read it and find as well that you better understand how you have done some bad things and lived with what you have done, you will truly understand the message of the book.

References