

Slightly Beyond Skepticism: Social Science and the Search for Morality. Leonard W. Doob. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987, 319 pages.

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Throughout a long and distinguished career, Leonard W. Doob has contributed significantly both by his scholarly writings and his gentle tutelage as a journal editor. In this book, he wrestles with another subject of great significance: moral reasoning. Taking his lead from John Dewey's admonition about "the evils which have resulted from severing morals from the actualities of human physiology and psychology" (p. 6), Doob also in effect argues that moral judgments are deficient unless they are linked with knowledge of human needs and capabilities, societal rules and expectations—in other words, not just with philosophy, but also with the subject matter of the social sciences.

To make his case, a number of different probing questions are considered as he punctuates his own arguments and "meanderings" with snippets of research findings and synopses of intellectual ideas of others. For example, in discussing the fallibility of observers, he alludes to the work of experimental-social psychologists who have studied the factors influencing trait judgments (Wyer et al.) as well as to the extreme skepticism of some social philosophers (e.g., Marcuse). The author's general insights as he threads his way between realist and idealist assumptions result in a kind of tempered skepticism ("slightly beyond skepticism," in his words), even towards skepticism itself.

Doob's thesis is similar in many respects to that of some other psychologists and sociologists who have sought a middle ground on which to base more pluralistic and ecumenical models of knowledge and morality. Thus, I found it hard to understand his feelings of dissatisfaction with a number of writers whom he characterizes as "gloomy voices"—a group in which he seems to include me (p. 188). I think he will find, on closer inspection of this and subsequent work, more pragmatism than nihilism, certainly more optimism than gloom. However, as he states: "All observers tend usually if not always to be fallible because they are human, lack adequate information, and can make only inferences concerning other persons and themselves" (p. 171).

As I believe the history of ideas teaches, models of knowledge, to be influential, must perforce reflect a way of emotional thinking in which aesthetics (Nisbet, 1976) as much as visualizability (Miller, 1978) both have an invisible hand. By visualizability I mean that concepts are perceptible, and by aesthetics that these perceptions have a visual beauty and harmony. In physics, for example, quantum theorists had a terrible time initially persuading physical determinists of how, given a very great many atoms, all capable of certain definite changes, it should be possible to tell what proportion will undergo each change, yet impossible to tell what particular changes any given

atom will undergo. "God does not play dice with the world"—was the way one great critic responded. Doob proposes a model of knowledge and morality on which it is also hard to get an exact fix, even though he tries to help us with explicit dictums (e.g., "the possible consequences of alternative courses of actions are anticipated and weighted" or "priority should be given principals' positive feelings regarding other persons"). That the arguments seem to wander in and out of focus, however, may be as much a function of the subject as of the author's treatment of it.

Slightly Beyond Skepticism brings a number of original ideas to some of the most fundamental and troubling questions of human nature, even if it requires us to proceed by a winding or indirect course in which answers are not always easily perceptible. It is an attempt at a grand synthesis of the kind that only someone with Doob's active intellect and lifetime of experience in the exploration of ideas could bring to bear on the profound questions he considers.

References

- Miller, A.I. (1978). Visualizability as a criterion for scientific acceptability. In J. Wechsler (Ed.), *On aesthetics in science* (pp. 73-96). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Nisbet, R. (1976). *Sociology as an art form*. London: Oxford University Press.