

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MENTAL IMMUNITY

April 26, 2022

Let's begin by sharing our general reactions to Andy Norman's book, Mental Immunity. Was it readable? Enjoyable? Valuable?

1. The book's title reflects an analogy between mental and physical health that the author believes to be important. What do you think? Does thinking about cognitive dysfunctions as something like failures of our biological immune system improve your understanding of human thinking? For instance, how does viewing "critical thinking" as a "conspicuous aspect of mental immune function" (p. 35) improve your understanding of critical thinking?
2. Norman uses the term "ideas" where most scholars would talk about "beliefs." He defines a bad idea as "one that is false, misleading, harmful, or otherwise problematic" (p. 40). What's the difference between ideas and beliefs? How are the concepts related? What non-belief ideas are appropriate targets of his concern? Are beliefs or ideas the proper focus of this book?
3. In addition to arguing that philosophy has tried to become a science (p. 22), Norman proposes that "cognitive immunology" is becoming a science. What about this? What are the requirements for something to be a science?
4. Norman also challenges the traditional fact-value distinction that leaves values beyond the reach of science. Thus, "The good-making and bad-making properties of an idea are facts, to be determined by honest inquiry as other facts are" (p. 41). This challenge rests on the assumed ethical axiom, "Well-being is good" (p. 49). Can there be a science of human values? What can science contribute to our understanding of values?
5. Norman also questions the critical thinking movement, suggesting that critical thinking is poorly understood and rarely taught effectively. This results, he argues, because of an over-emphasis on CT skills and a lack of concern for "habits of mind" (p. 29) such as "curiosity, diligence, and fair-mindedness" (p. 65). Your thoughts?
6. Norman argues that "mental immune systems are functionally defined, and that functioning is observed to happen" (p. 44), making these systems as real and subject to scientific investigation as other cognitive phenomena. If this is granted, are there any limits to the conceptual schemes or "lenses" (p. 49) one can propose for the scientific study of the mind?
7. The cognitive immune system paradigm can be applied at both the individual and collective levels of analysis. How would you assess the adequacy of our culture's cognitive immune system? Have its resources for limiting the influence of bad ideas proven to be adequate?
8. Norman attributes much of our individual and collective mental dysfunction to "willful belief" (p. 62), an unwillingness to acknowledge and change one's mind in response to good

reasons. This habit, cultivated historically by religions, has “spilled over” into other domains, breeding science denial, conspiracy thinking, and other mental malfunctions. Your thoughts?

9. Chapter 4 identifies six “immune-disruptive ideas” that “diminish the mind’s ability to ward off bad ideas” (p. 70).

1. Beliefs are private, and no one else’s concern.
2. We have a right to believe what we like.
3. Values are subjective—relative, that is, to a fundamentally arbitrary set of preferences.
4. We have no standing to criticize other people’s value judgments.
5. Basic value commitments are not subject to rational assessment.
6. Questioning a person’s core commitments is fundamentally intolerant, mean-spirited, offensive, or unkind.

Do you agree with Norman’s challenges to these assumptions about human beliefs and values?

10. Relatedly, Norman identifies nine devices used by individuals and cultures to protect bad ideas from criticism. Entitled the “Postmodern Playbook for Defenders of Dodgy-Ideas” (p. 82), these are: The Privacy Contrivance; The Right to Believe Ruse; The Thought Police Ploy; The Who’s to Say? Gambit; The Sacred Belief Stratagem; The Faith Card; The Faith Feint; The Precious Delusion Dodge; and The Offense Defense. Have you ever used any of these? Can any of them be viewed as a legitimate defense?

11. Chapter 5 identifies two attitudes that compromise mental immune systems: The “way of belief” hardens into ideological certainty; and the Socratic method typically slips into combative opposition to the other side. As an alternative, Norman proposes the “way of inquiry” which engages others in a collaborative search for truth. What about this?

12. In Chapter 6, which considers the nature of responsible believing, Norman endorses Clifford’s argument that “believing things upon insufficient evidence is not just unreasonable, it is unethical” (p. 112) in opposition to William James’s justification for religious beliefs based on faith. Does Clifford’s “Shipowner’s Parable” substantiate his claim that we are ethically obligated to only believe on the basis of adequate evidence?

13. What matters in the evaluation of beliefs: Their downstream implications or consequences, as per William James’s pragmatism, or their upstream evidential support, as per Clifford? Can religion be justified on the grounds that, its lack of evidential support notwithstanding, it provides enormous social and psychological benefits to adherents?

14. Chapter 7 considers how our beliefs should be regulated to limit the influence of bad ideas. Norman follows C. S. Peirce in arguing that science is a reliable belief-fixation method, going on to assert that science can be applied to more than issues of empirical fact. Thus, “We can test ideas about right and wrong by, among other things, working out their downstream pragmatic implications and observing whether they promote flourishing” (p. 165). Do you agree with this, for instance that science can be used to resolve public policy and other issues involving human values?

15. Norman defines “reason” as “a way of referring to something’s being available for premising” (p. 179). However, against the common philosophical claim that a reason is something that can be used to support or justify a conclusion, Norman argues that reasons are “opportunities to change minds” (p. 182). Though Norman doesn’t do so, we might ask, what then drives the distinction between good and bad reasons? Aren’t good reasons more likely to change minds as a result of the substantive support they provide for a claim?

16. Per Norman (p. 186), an unwritten rule of discourse is that “we’re supposed to accept what can be shown to be reasonable and give up what is shown to be unreasonable.” He calls this rule or norm “reason’s fulcrum.” Do you agree that this is a legitimate, if unwritten, norm or rule? What would be the effects if it were widely adhered to, if we were all “resolute rationalists” (p. 202). Is it advisable for individuals to be “resolute rationalists” if most people in their society are not? How would a party of “resolute rationalists” fare in our political scene?

17. Norman’s “damaged fulcrum model” of the descent into ideological thinking (p. 211) proposes that our thinking—individually and collectively—becomes unhinged when reason’s fulcrum isn’t working properly—for instance, people don’t revise their beliefs in response to good reasons. Either they are unable to see the force of those reasons or they are unwilling to yield to them. What do you think of this?

18. Defining a norm as a kind of standing or self-perpetuating pattern of expectation, Norman describes how social norms emerge, lapse, and potentially recover. Might current failings in American culture be understood in terms of declining norms? What might be done about this?

19. What about the notion of “identity-protective cognition,” our reluctance to thinking thoughts that threaten our chosen identities (p. 221)? Do you see this in your own thinking? Is it a significant cause of our cultural dysfunction?

20. Combining ideas from Rebecca Goldstein and Dan Kahan, Norman proposes the concept of “mattering-protective cognition” (p. 222) along with “Norman’s Law”: “It’s difficult to reason well when you need to reason poorly to feel like a decent human being” (p. 223). Are these important tools for understanding our mental failings?

21. In an attempt to salvage the benefits of religion while avoiding its harms, Norman proposes a good faith/bad faith distinction in which the latter encompasses the close-minded unresponsiveness to reason and evidence that has historically characterized religious belief, while “good faith” denotes things like hope, trust, and the resolutely positive attitude that religious people often derive from their religious beliefs. Might it be possible to “secularize good faith” in this way, while leaving the rest behind, as Norman suggests (p. 227)?

22. Cautioning us against the “mindset of the morally incurious” (p. 248), Norman proposes to develop a better understanding of “reason’s requirements,” arguing that this will enable us to “get better at screening out bad ideas and better at letting in good ones” (p. 258). How does the book pursue this objective? Does it achieve its goal?

23. Chapter 11 reviews the history of Western philosophy and its attempts to understand reason’s requirements, concluding that none of the major efforts have been successful. Do you agree?

Hasn't any progress been made? For instance, isn't evidentialism, the most recent approach cited by Norman, an improvement over Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes?

24. Norman discusses Alvin Plantinga's argument that "in many cases, rational belief simply doesn't require evidence" (p. 299), an argument Plantinga uses to justify belief in God. The argument alleges that we all rely on "properly basic" beliefs that aren't based on anything more basic and are rationally permissible nonetheless. Such beliefs serve as unargued premises, and unfortunately, the requirements for being such have not been spelled out. How might properly basic beliefs—our foundational assumptions—be identified? Is the existence of God such a properly basic belief?

25. Finally, in Chapter 12, Norman presents "a general purpose mind vaccine: a cognitive standard that reduces susceptibility to bad ideas" (p. 303). His vaccine centers on the notion of challenges, discursive moves that call into question a claim or premise advanced by the other party. Norman identifies "onus-bearing challenges" that take on the burden of proof when circumstances offer up suitable grounds for doubt, differentiating these from "bare challenges" that offer no real grounds for doubt but simply question the premise at issue. This distinction drives Norman's "New Socratic Model" in which bare challenges are deflected back on the objector—"Why do you doubt my premise?"—while onus-bearing challenges engage all parties in collaborative inquiry. What about this? Does it deliver the epistemic goods Norman has promised, both in this chapter and throughout the book?

26. "Mental Immunity" concludes with a kind of "12-Step Program" to cognitive immune health. The steps are summarized as follows:

1. Play with ideas.
2. Understand that minds are not passive knowledge receptacles.
3. Get past the self-indulgent idea that you're entitled to your opinions.
4. Distinguish between good and bad faith.
5. Give up the idea that learning is merely a matter of adding to the mind's knowledge stockpile.
6. True wisdom requires you to clarify and order your thoughts.
7. Don't use "Who's to say?" to cut short unsettling inquiries.
8. Let go of the idea that value judgments can't be objective.
9. Treat challenges to your beliefs as opportunities rather than threats.
10. Satisfy your need for belonging with a community of inquiry rather than a community of belief.
11. Upgrade your understanding of reasonable belief.
12. Don't underestimate the value of ideas that have survived scrutiny.

What about this? Which steps are most noteworthy? Novel and important for you? Do any seem trite, not worth this level of attention? Taken as a whole, do these steps, and the book as a whole, provide a compelling, workable program for achieving substantial improvements in our thinking?