

2-10-2012

## A Moral Paradox of Martial Training

Charles W. Wright

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [cwright@csbsju.edu](mailto:cwright@csbsju.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wright, Charles W. (2010) "A Moral Paradox of Martial Training," *Headwaters: The Faculty Journal of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University*: Vol. 27, 58-72.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol27/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Headwaters: The Faculty Journal of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

## A Moral Paradox of Martial Training

*It is widely accepted by practitioners that at least one aim of martial training is moral development. It is equally well known that proficiency in a martial discipline often fosters egocentrism. I propose to examine this tension between the moral aspirations of martial discipline and the all too familiar failings of many advanced practitioners from the perspective of evolutionary biology and social psychology. First I will review the origins of what I call the moral imperative of Aikido and the role that perspective taking in Aikido training can play in opening the door to moral development. I'll then consider how certain evolved propensities that organize human behavior — the pursuit of social status and in-group solidarity — can commandeer martial training that could be directed toward moral self-cultivation. The capacity of Aikido to support the development of empathic awareness of others will be, so to speak, bypassed while the discipline is pressed into the service of status seeking and in-group solidarity. I will conclude with some reflections on the significance of these evolved dispositions for the project of moral self-cultivation.*

I start with what I hope is a relatively uncontroversial claim, which is that responsible practitioners of traditional martial arts suppose that one aim of martial training is the cultivation of moral character. Needless to say, there is quite a lot packed into the qualifiers “responsible” and “traditional.” Implicit in them are claims to the effect that, for example, training in mixed martial arts as preparation for competition in the Ultimate Fighting Championships or some such will not share this goal. I could be wrong, though. Despite my prejudices, there could well be some kind of morally commendable development of character taking place in such training venues. Still, I don't want to get bogged down just now in parsing the varieties of moral virtue that different martial forms and aspirations might or might not cultivate. So I shall simply and hopefully assert that some martial practitioners explicitly endorse the aspiration that their training should foster some kind of moral development. It is to this aspiration I want to turn my attention. Let me now also quickly narrow the scope of my discussion to Aikido, because this is the martial art with which I have most extensive experience. It may be the case that the dynamic that I describe here is equally true of practitioners of other martial arts. I strongly suspect that it might be, but I have neither the experiential nor the evidentiary basis for making such claims.

## The Moral Imperative of Aikido

Practitioners of Aikido like to emphasize the status of their art as a “gentle” or “non-violent” martial art and frequently invoke the words of the art’s founder, Morihei Ueshiba, on reconciliation, empathy, love and the like. One representative passage should be sufficient to illustrate this feature of the Aikido ethos:

Aikido does not rely on weapons or brute force to succeed, instead we put ourselves in tune with the universe, maintain peace in our own realms, nurture life, and prevent death and destruction. The true meaning of the term Samurai is one who serves and adheres to the power of love. (Stevens, 1992, p. 45)

Some technical observations will also help to explain this idea that Aikido is a path of gentleness and harmony. First, with few exceptions, Aikido techniques are designed to respond to, rather than initiate, aggression. Without an attacker, Aikido techniques are for the most part nonfunctional. They’re certainly no good for breaking boards or bricks. Second, the techniques in Aikido are constructed to make it possible to control aggression with a relative minimum of harm to the aggressor. In principle, if not necessarily in practice, the techniques of Aikido — when properly executed — should allow the defender to protect the attacker as well as himself.<sup>1</sup> While the competent practitioner *need not* seriously injure an attacker, Aikido techniques still can be used to inflict very serious damage, if one chooses. Applied with violent, destructive intent, they can yield commensurate results. Thus it is not the techniques of Aikido alone that ensure that minimum harm is done to the attacker, but rather the intent of the practitioner. And, so, to act in a manner commensurate with the nonaggressive ethos of Aikido it becomes important that the practitioner cultivate a certain character. Yukio Utada Sensei, my first teacher, described this endeavor in terms of “wearing away the ego.” The Founder spoke also in terms of cultivating love. In another representative statement he says, for instance, that

All life is a manifestation of the spirit, the manifestation of love. And Aikido is the purest form of that principle. A warrior is charged with bringing a halt to all contention and strife. (Stevens, 1992, p. 41)

Thus, to practice Aikido as the Founder thought it ought to be practiced, and as the great majority of practitioners also say it ought to be practiced, one must empty oneself of the propensities for violence, competition, and self-aggrandizement that arise in one’s psyche. Further, it is supposed in the community of practitioners that training in Aikido should cultivate the requisite moral and psychic dispositions. This is what I call the moral imperative of Aikido.

## Mystical Origins of the Moral Imperative

The moral imperative can be traced back to the Founder's experiences of mystical insight. These have been fairly well documented (Stevens, 1987), so I will not dwell on the particulars. For our purposes, what counts is what Ueshiba Sensei learned from these experiences. As so often is the case with mystical experiences, what he learned was that all things are connected, that all beings are in some fundamental sense kin. From the martial arts perspective this mystical perspective raises interesting issues. The enemy, the attacker, is the paradigm case of the Other. A resolute duality is fundamental to the relationship of attacker and attacked. Yet, from the nondual perspective of mystical insight, the enemy is also friend, kin, and, ultimately, self. This is why Ueshiba Sensei would say things like "harming another is harming oneself."

Thus, the experience of the mystical unity of the cosmos posed for the Founder the challenge of creating a martial practice that acknowledges the ultimate kinship of defender and attacker. The solution Ueshiba Sensei proposed was first to modify the *jutsu* he had learned so that they could be applied with minimal harm to the attacker. But he also modified the goal of martial training. Victory in combat with an enemy was no longer the primary goal. Instead, it became victory over the egocentric propensities in one's own soul that give rise to conflict in the first place. This is the principle of *masagatsu agatsu*, "true victory is victory over oneself" (or, "true victory of self-mastery"). Thus the ultimate purpose of training in Aikido is to foster in the practitioner the same moral perspective achieved by Ueshiba Sensei. But whereas the Founder gained his moral perspective through mystical insight, the everyday practitioner must cultivate it through other means.

Before I proceed further, let me add a few more words on the nondual perspective arising from mystical insight. This perspective shows us that conflict rests on two fundamental dualities. The first is ontological: I am not that other. The second is moral: I am right (or good) and that other is wrong (or bad). The first duality is arguably a condition for the possibility of sentient life. Finding something to eat and avoiding becoming something else's meal would seem to be impossible without the capacity to distinguish between self and other. As for the second, the very existence of social order probably depends upon the duality of right and wrong. This duality pervades the waking lives of most humans most of the time, and may also play a role in some mammalian social systems. It is hard to see how the social conflicts humans are typically embroiled in could arise if one side didn't think itself right, and the other wrong.

This isn't to say that these dualisms *cause* or *precipitate* conflict. Usually the proximate cause is some particular desire for some particular state of affairs, realization of which someone else is impeding. But they are ultimate causes. Remove them and

the ground for conflict evaporates. That's why mystical insight can so often be such a powerful force for nonviolence. Both dualisms are abandoned. Ontologically, I *am* that other. Ethically, I and that other are *both equally right and wrong*.

The Founder's basic insight was that attacker and defender are kin, are ultimately in some sense the same self. In what follows, I'll suggest that one way this moral perspective might be captured in everyday, not mystical, experience is through perspective taking. My supposition is that when people bring themselves to the point that they are able to understand how an action, situation, or problem looks from the perspective of another person, they will for that moment have eliminated the two dualities that are at the root of interpersonal conflict. In what follows I'll explain how the structure of practice in Aikido allows for the cultivation of such perspective taking.

## Perspective Taking and Martial Practice

In Aikido we practice techniques in pairs. One person takes the role of attacker, one of defender. The attack is prescribed, as is the technique. For a period, two people practice one attack-technique combination while regularly changing roles as attacker and defender. Then the instructor introduces a new attack-technique combination, and new pairs form to practice it. And so forth. More innovative teachers do a lot of tinkering with this pattern, but that's the basic training structure.

Now one ethical requirement associated with this training — no surprise — is that each partner must practice in a manner compatible with the other's capacities. For obvious reasons, this requirement protects the less experienced students. A second ethical responsibility for the more advanced practitioners — again, no surprise — is to help their less advanced partners improve their technique. The instructor oversees the entire training venue, of course, and can intervene to offer corrections and suggestions for improvement. But a great deal of the teaching that takes place occurs in the interactions between more and less experienced practitioners as they work on a technique.

These two ethical requirements, along with the less experienced practitioner's particular level of ability, effectively impose limits on the more experienced practitioner's training. The speed, power, rhythm, flow, and aerobic quality of the practice are constrained by these factors. The opportunity for moral training that I shall highlight is located in the more experienced practitioner's response to this situation. In what follows, I'll consider two basic types of responses available to the more senior student.

One family of responses I'll call *egocentric*. What defines the situation in this case is the senior student's desire to improve his technique. Training for such a student is about himself and his own technical development. Because the less experienced

person won't be able to do much to help him improve — won't be able to challenge him, correct weaknesses in his technique, allow him to train at the level of intensity that he thinks necessary for his own development — the limit imposed by the other is experienced *as* a limit. The advanced practitioner is kept from doing what he wants because he must work at his partner's level. To be sure, there is some value in learning to control one's impatience in such a situation, and more value to be found in being gracious about it. But the basic pattern here is one in which one practitioner experiences another *as* a constraint and fundamentally responds to this constraint with some mixture of impatience, dissatisfaction, or disappointment.

This is practice in the absence of perspective taking. In this instance, both the dualities at the root of social conflict seem to me to be left more or less intact. Ontologically, this is fairly plain to see. Insofar as the junior partner is experienced as an impediment to the more experienced practitioner's aims, the latter is unlikely to see the former as like himself, as a kindred being. Her status as an impediment ensures that the less experienced practitioner remains an Other for her more experienced partner. Matters are not quite so straightforward from the ethical perspective, however, since there appears to be no obvious issue of right and wrong, no moral conflict. But if we look a little more closely at the experienced practitioner's fundamental response of dissatisfaction, impatience, and disappointment, certain dimensions of a situation of ethical conflict will emerge.

The first thing we might notice is that this affective response bears a family resemblance to the emotions that *are* typically elicited in response to moral violations — outrage, anger, resentment, disappointment, and the like. It would be a clear exaggeration to claim on the basis of this similarity that the egocentric practitioner reacts as if her less experienced partner, by virtue of her inexperience, has committed a moral wrong. I think, though, that we can see how this resemblance points toward the persistence of the ethical duality if we consider certain general features of a morally egocentric perspective.

As I am using the term here, an egocentric perspective on a situation can be understood to consist in the supposition — usually implicit — that an individual's expectations, settled convictions, or wishes concerning how the world ought to be ordered are normative, are what define right and wrong. In a situation or circumstance that does not fit an egocentric individual's expectations, settled convictions or wishes, that person's response is typically to suppose — to both feel and think — that something is wrong. Since I am speaking of moral egocentrism generally, we need not suppose that the egocentric individual necessarily has *self-centered* desires or expectations. The religious fundamentalist who sincerely believes that the well-being of all humanity depends upon their adherence to the particular creed she endorses is egocentric in the sense that I am using the term here. Egocentrism in this sense is simply the felt

conviction that one's own perspective on an issue is normative, that others ought to or do share this perspective, and that something is wrong when the expectations, settled convictions, or wishes making up this perspective are frustrated or disappointed.

In the more particular case of the egocentric Aikido practitioner under consideration, the perspective that he takes to be normative also happens to be self-centered. It is a kind of generalized self-centeredness — an implicit supposition that all persons involved in this martial practice seek principally to develop their own proficiency. Proceeding from this basic supposition, other persons who in some respect frustrate or impede this aspiration will as a result elicit the response — felt and thought — that a kind of normative expectation has been violated, that something just isn't right. So we can see that the experience of impatience, frustration, or disappointment in response to the opportunity to train with a less experienced practitioner indicates that the ethical duality — that the self's expectations are normative (are "right"), and other is violating normative expectations (is "wrong") — is also left intact.

I'll call the other family of responses *decentered*. This is the response of one who does not experience the limitations of the other's technique as an impediment, but as an opportunity. In this case, what the more experienced practitioner wants is to be of help to the other. To really be of assistance to another, it helps a great deal to engage in some perspective taking. It is in this perspective taking that I think we can see one important root for the moral development that O'Sensei<sup>2</sup> endorsed.

Perspective taking can offer insight into several different dimensions of the less experienced practitioner's experience. One of these would be the dimension of physical coordination. In taking the perspective of the other, the more experienced practitioner would gain insight into matters such as particular ways her partner's body has not yet learned to move, unconscious physical habits that obstruct correct form, points of balance he has not yet learned to recognize, and the like. The more experienced practitioner returns to beginner's mind — in the sense that she recalls all the things her own body has learned, experienced and undergone, drawing on her kinesthetic memory of what physical dispositions have and have not allowed techniques to work.

In addition to physical dimensions to the development of technique, perspective taking also allows the decentered practitioner to gain insight into how the other's mental states may affect his learning. She attends to issues such as whether her partner is afraid to fall, whether certain motions cause her to flinch or otherwise lose focus on the technique, whether the physical proximity required by Aikido techniques causes her discomfort, what this person's response to frustration is, what level of frustration advances practice, what level retards it, and so forth.

Adding another level of reflexivity, perspective taking further allows the more advanced practitioner to grasp how her own comportment toward the less experienced

student affects the latter's learning. She can observe how her particular approach to interacting with her partner might be creating frustration or understanding, anxiety or comfort, widened perception or information overload, and so forth.

These several dimensions of perspective taking culminate, I'd like to suggest, when the more experienced practitioner is able to genuinely take pleasure in the other's achievements. Adopting the perspective of her less experienced partner, the more experienced practitioner is able to gain insight into the particular impediments that she is struggling with in her attempt to master the technique. She understands the impediments from the perspective of her partner. When one of those impediments dissolves for a moment and the technique flows a little more easily, she understands this dissolution from the perspective of her partner as well. Insofar as this dissolution of an impediment to development elicits pleasure in the junior partner, it will elicit pleasure in the more experienced practitioner as well. Indeed, the more experienced practitioner may experience greater pleasure at the breakthrough than her junior partner because she understands better what has just happened.

My suggestion is that in such instances of vicarious pleasure in another's achievement we encounter a micro scale realization of the mystic's macro scale ontological insight into the interconnection of things. The decentered comportment of the more experienced practitioner represents, as it were, a practical *acknowledgement* of the ontological interconnection of the practice partners. The dissolution of the impediment to development with which the junior partner is struggling is the practical *realization* of this interconnectedness. The more advanced practitioner's vicarious pleasure in the junior student's advance arises from the former's perspective taking mediated *experience* of the latter's breakthrough. It is a mutual experience, made possible by a brief falling away of the ontological duality of self and other.

The ethical duality — the sense that one is right and the other wrong — has also been abandoned in this situation. Obviously, it was abandoned initially simply by the more experienced practitioner's decision to adopt a decentered orientation in the training session. But what I want to suggest is that consistent cultivation of the perspective taking entailed by the decentered perspective may help to foster a stable disposition toward not assuming that one's own default perspective is the only possible or legitimate perspective. As an example, consider the judgment "this technique is easy." From the perspective of the egocentric practitioner, this judgment becomes normative and the less experienced practitioner's technical awkwardness is treated as a shortcoming or failure.

The decentered practitioner, by contrast, understands that "this technique is easy" is a judgment only possible from her own particular perspective, that of an experienced practitioner. The perspective of the junior partner is something quite different,

insight into which is to be gained through perspective taking. Consistent cultivation of such perspective taking, I'd like to suggest, can contribute to the reduction of egocentric propensities (can help "wear away the ego") as the practitioner develops a stable disposition to see the world from a diversity of perspectives distinct from her own. This cultivation will allow the decentered practitioner to loosen her grip on her own perspective, to let go of the near-automatic assumption that one's own expectations, settled convictions and wishes about how the world should be are normative.

Before moving on, I'd like first to anticipate a pair of misunderstandings. First, I do not mean to suggest that this decentered comportment necessarily results in improved learning for the less experienced practitioner. I'm not sure about that, and it isn't hard to imagine that, for some people at least, being egocentrically corrected by an impatient advanced practitioner might spur them on to more intense effort and so to more rapid technical learning. My suggestion, rather, is that the decentered approach opens the way for certain kinds of moral development and insight in the more experienced practitioner that the egocentric approach closes off.

Second, I also recognize that no one person ever purely manifests just one or another of these two orientations. Every individual embodies a mixture of the types. But while none of us is a purely decentered or egocentric practitioner, the opportunity for moral development will depend on which type predominates, and to what degree.

## Training Augments Egocentrism

When I first started practicing Aikido, I was convinced that this moral development was an almost automatic result of earnest training. There were apocryphal stories in my first dojo of some of Utada Sensei's long time students who had entered as aggressive, competitive, self-centered people and then after years of training had been transformed. But then I began hearing stories of the political struggles and personal rivalries (indeed, animosities) among the highest ranking practitioners — the heads of other dojos and national organizations. This certainly didn't sound like the behavior of people who had been wearing away their egos. This is where we get to the moral paradox referenced in the title. Aikido is an art that is in principle dedicated to developing compassion for others, yet many of the highest-ranking practitioners seem to be as egocentric as anybody else. Indeed, their egocentric orientation might even have been reinforced by their technical proficiency because it draws so much admiring and uncritical attention from aspiring practitioners. In what follows, I'd like to draw on insights from evolutionary biology and recent social psychology to offer an account of how an art meant to be dedicated to the wearing away of the ego can end up simply reinforcing it. What this account will underscore is one dimension of Master Ueshiba's

insight — that if the martial training is to have the formative effect he envisioned, it must also at the same time be a kind of religious training.

Let me turn now to the factors that encourage practitioners to use their proficiency as a vehicle for reinforcing, rather than reducing their egos. I'll start with status competition. It probably isn't news to most of us that humans are prone to compete with one another for social prestige. In the *Republic* Plato worried about the corrosive effects of *pleonexia*. For Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, status competition was the sprout out of which all more developed forms of social inequality grew. Primatologists and sociobiologists have in recent years helped us to see how very deep rooted this propensity is. To appreciate the force of their insight, let's remind ourselves of the basic pattern of natural selection. A heritable trait — be it morphological or behavioral — that confers greater fitness on a member of a population will, in time, spread throughout the population. The coin of fitness, of course, is reproductive success, leaving behind more offspring who themselves survive to reproductive age. Now the trait in question is status seeking — or, in language less pleasant to egalitarian ears — the pursuit of social dominance. If high status or social dominance allows some individuals in a population of social animals to enjoy greater reproductive success than subordinate individuals, and if this propensity to seek social dominance is a heritable trait, then the propensity will spread throughout the population.

As it happens, the evidence that socially dominant animals enjoy greater reproductive success is fairly unambiguous. Dominant males typically enjoy greater access to food and estrous females (Boehm, 1999). Dominant females are better nourished, are less subject to harassment, have shorter between-birth intervals, have a greater proportion of their offspring survive to reproductive age, and in some cases even enjoy the prerogative of killing the infants of subordinate members of their own group (Hrdy 1981).

The same general pattern can be observed in human societies. Evidence from foraging societies suggests that the most important variable for explaining the prevalence of hunting among foragers may be the prestige benefits enjoyed by successful hunters (Hawkes, 1991, 2002). The resources at the disposal of high-status persons in developed nations is evident for all to see. Just as high prestige brings rewards, so low prestige carries costs. A recent report in *Science* reviewed evidence that low social-economic status persons in developed nations experienced significantly worse health outcomes. Most strikingly, evidence indicated that only a small portion of the connection between socioeconomic status and poor health could be explained by lifestyle differences. Instead, “the disease consequences of feeling poor are often rooted in the psychosocial consequences of being made to feel poor by one's surroundings” (Sapolsky, 2005, p. 652).

From the perspective of natural selection, then, it is only to be expected that the pursuit of social rank and the perquisites of power that accompany rank will be among the oldest and most deeply rooted drives in our motivational economy. In the words of primatologist Frans deWaal (1996),

The desire to dictate the behavior of others is such a timeless and universal attribute of our species that it must rank with the sex drive, maternal instinct, and the will to survive in terms of the likelihood of its being a part of our biological heritage. (p. 98)

It isn't hard to see how training in the martial arts takes place in a social environment optimally configured to elicit competitive prestige seeking. The social structure of the dojo is built around a clear hierarchy of rank established through public demonstrations of proficiency in the discipline. A person's status within the training community is intimately linked to conferred rank. Advancement to higher ranks and, thus, higher prestige is also typically associated with competitive success — with victory, or at least credible performance in martial competition. It is not hard to see how the social dominance achieved through martial training is fundamental and visceral. Aikido is an exception to this last condition — achievement through competitive success — but as I'll suggest a bit later, that doesn't seem to make all that much difference.

The next factor I'd like to consider is the role of group solidarity in the human motivational infrastructure. Just as the competitiveness of human beings surprises no one, few thoughtful observers of human affairs are surprised by the ease with which humans establish affectively valenced group boundaries. These informal insights have received abundant empirical support. In the 1950s Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues reported on the ease with which prepubescent boys with no prior social contact could be induced to form ingroups with differentiated status positions and reciprocal role expectations. In one remarkable experiment they elicited in-group formation simply by organizing a series of engaging outdoor activities over the period of a week. They also found that mere knowledge of the presence of another group in the area elicited strong desires for competitive interaction. When on-site counselors arranged for a series of intergroup contests, antagonistic relations quickly developed, leading to such behavior as name-calling, stereotyping of outgroup members, destruction of outgroup property and raids on outgroup living quarters (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961).

During the 1970s Henri Tajfel demonstrated experimentally that people categorized into groups on the basis of factors as trivial as visual judgments or aesthetic preferences were then disposed to behave differentially toward members of the other group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, Billig & Bundy, 1971). Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment demonstrated the ease with which normal individuals could be induced to identify with antagonistic roles arbitrarily assigned to them by the experimenter. In

this experiment, ordinary young college-age adults were induced to adopt the roles, attitudes, and self-concepts of authoritarian guards and subjugated prisoners. The participants' self-identification with these roles became so complete that the experiment had to be ended early out of concern for the participants' well-being. Particularly striking was the student-guards' self-perceived gains in power, social status, and ingroup identification (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973).

I suggest that this propensity to situate oneself within an ingroup/outgroup pattern and to identify with the ingroup will intersect with and reinforce the status competition in a training community. Each rank represents a potential ingroup of which the aspiring student could become a member, but I suspect that it is at the higher ranks that this process becomes more pronounced. Brown belt, the next in line for black belt, seems to me to be the point at which practitioners begin to take on a rank-related group identity. Membership in the brown or black belt group confers prestige — often even outside the dojo — and members experience group solidarity. It seems to me that the student's aspiration to achieve rank and enjoy the solidarity of a prestigious ingroup will, all things being equal, tend to contribute to an egocentric training orientation with less experienced practitioners and to distract from or devalue the decentered training orientation. This is because membership in good standing depends upon regular demonstrations of a particular degree of proficiency, and this demonstration is most effectively achieved — and as a result, most clearly perceived by others — when practicing with similarly or higher ranked practitioners. Practice with a beginner will be unsatisfactory because it does not allow for demonstrations of proficiency that highlight and reinforce one's membership in the more prestigious ingroup, or that advertise one's eligibility for membership.

These considerations suggest that we should expect the most competitive as well as the most talented practitioners to rise to the highest ranks in most martial arts. Since highly competitive individuals sometimes sacrifice other moral commitments on the altar of victory, it will also happen on occasion that not very nice people end up holding some of the highest-ranking positions. That this is what actually happens goes almost without saying. This outcome receives a kind of archetypical recognition in the prevalence of highly skilled martial arts bad guys in popular films and stories.

But Aikido is supposed to be an exception to this pattern, as I've indicated already. The Founder emphasized that training should cultivate compassion and a host of other socially desirable characteristics. Training in Aikido involves no sparring, tournaments, or other formal competitions. Practitioners are encouraged to aspire to harmony and compassion. Some teachers, recognizing that a ranking system by itself also encourages competitive prestige seeking, have gone so far as to eliminate formal ranks (e.g., David Lynch).

Nevertheless, egocentric people still seem to come out on top — not all the time, but often enough to be troubling — a fact that elicits commentary within the community of Aikido practitioners from time to time. What’s more, these folks typically are also skilled in verbal discussions of the way of harmony. They know how to talk the talk, even as they don’t seem to walk the walk. One conscientious critic has recounted how he spoke publicly of this disconnect between professed value commitments and personal conduct before an audience of advanced Aikido practitioners. In this audience were even some individuals whose conduct had prompted his critique, though (of course) they remained unnamed. After the discussion had ended, some of these very individuals came up to him, thanked him for his presentation and agreed with him that he had identified a matter of serious concern for all practitioners. To his astonishment, their compliments were heartfelt and they seemed not to recognize that he had been talking about their own behavior!

This remarkable episode leads me to the final social-psychological factor giving rise to the paradox of martial self-cultivation, and that is the role of automatic cognitive systems in the human mind. In the past couple of decades researchers in social psychology have proposed that human social behavior and cognition can be associated with two separate cognitive systems (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Zajonc, 1980). One, the controlled system, is the domain of ordinary conscious awareness and rational thought. This is the system at work when we do math in our heads, imagine a warm summer’s day in the middle of winter, and try to convince our colleagues to do things our way. The cognitive operations associated with the controlled system are typically slow, effortful, and intentionally directed; they require attention and are available to conscious introspection. The other is the automatic system, also recently dubbed the “adaptive unconscious” (Wilson, 2002). Cognition in this system is fast, effortless, and not intentionally directed; it requires no attention and — most important for my purposes here — its operations are largely inaccessible to conscious introspection.

An obvious and uncontroversial example of such automatic processing is the work of the visual cortex as it turns light waves received by the eyes into our consciously experienced visual percepts. More controversial and uncomfortable — especially for philosophers, it seems — are processes of practical decision making and the interpretation of social situations that also seem to operate automatically. The unsettling implication of this research is that to a significant degree human beings literally do not know what they are doing as they go through their daily lives.

The key issue for my purposes is that this dual-process perspective explains rather neatly how a person can sincerely espouse the values and principles of harmony, non-competition, and the like while yet behaving in an egocentric manner — by which

I mean engaging in competitive prestige seeking, orienting oneself primarily to the perspective, priorities, and opinions of one's high ranked associates, and experiencing practice with beginners as a burden, obligation, or constraint. (Or else taking practice with beginners as an opportunity to assert dominance.) For virtually the entire evolutionary history of the human species, including that of our hominid and pre-hominid ancestors as well, social rank conferred significant fitness benefits. As a result, competitive status seeking has — so to speak — been built into the adaptive unconscious. By this I don't mean that humans (or chimpanzees, for that matter) think to themselves, "I'd better do what it takes to get some social prestige so that I can leave behind more babies than the others." Rather, I mean simply that we do these things because those individuals who happen to have behaved this way in the evolutionary past also happen to have had more offspring survive to reproductive age. A behavioral trait that evolved in response to an enduring adaptive challenge faced by members of an intensely social species is one that, from the perspective of natural selection, it makes most sense to put on automatic, since this mode of processing is energetically cheap and, in a relatively invariant environment, highly reliable.

The source of the moral paradox in the practice of Aikido, then, lies in the disconnect between our controlled and automatic systems of cognition. Humans can act on the propensity to seek social prestige and dominance over others even as we consciously disavow this goal and embrace a different set of values.

## Mindfulness

To close I would like briefly now to consider what this conclusion means for the martial practitioner genuinely committed to the project of moral self-cultivation. Whether anything might be done to keep egocentric people from rising to the highest ranks is another matter — one about which I am not sanguine, and which I will simply put aside. But for the individual there is something to be done, a practice that allows one to grapple with the aspirations of the adaptive unconscious. Buddhists call it mindfulness, and this will be the label that I use, but the basic practice is recognized and endorsed by all of the world's major religious traditions. The practice is really very straightforward. One simply attends to what arises in one's mind. Sitting meditation is one locus for this practice, and mindfulness is the extension of this practice to one's waking life. The practice consists in careful, persistent observation of what arises in one's mind and of how one behaves in relation to these mental events. According to the dual-process perspective the information processing and affective valencing that gives rise to ideas, goals, intentions, emotional responses and the like takes place out of the reach of the conscious mind. But the *results* of these unconscious processes are

available to conscious awareness — if one is paying attention. By paying attention one can observe the products of the adaptive unconscious arising in one's mind, the circumstances in which these responses typically are elicited, and how particular behavioral responses or patterns are associated with these circumstances and mental events. We needn't suppose a person ever perceives a causal connection between the mental events and one's behavior — here we may indeed have recourse only to Hume's constant conjunction, as far as our introspective abilities go. But for practical purposes, what we get seems to be enough.

There's a great deal more to be said about the practice of mindfulness — in particular, about how a growing familiarity with the associations between mental states and one's typical emotional and behavioral reactions in particular circumstances can then be put to use toward abandoning those impulses. But this would take us rather far afield from the immediate topic of this essay. And in any case, the point with which I'd like to close these reflections does not require us to go into such detail. This point is only that *if* martial training — in Aikido in particular, but in any other discipline as well — is to serve the goal of moral self-cultivation, then the *martial* practice will have to be infused with or augmented by this practice of self-observation.

I'm tempted to say that martial practitioners will have to get religion, but that's probably incorrect. On the one hand, mindfulness — or whatever we call this practice of self-observation — has traditionally been a religious practice in the sense, first, that it seems to have its most definitive origins in the context of religious traditions, as well as, second, that the practice was conceived as a vehicle for removing egocentric impediments to the experience of transcendent reality, however we may name that. Now the moral effect of this practice was also widely recognized to consist in a gradual abandonment of the attachments out of which a sense of separate self was established and nourished. I can see no reason in principle why this moral effect could not be achieved through a practice of mindfulness removed from its traditional religious context. Moral aspiration alone may motivate some individuals to engage in this practice as effectively as the aspiration to experience mystical union with a transcendent reality motivates others. But by whatever name we call it, and whatever the particular motivation that engages the practitioner, martial training in the absence of such practical self-awareness seems destined simply to serve our ancient evolved aspirations.

*Chuck Wright is an Associate Professor of Philosophy with the rank of Nidan (second degree black belt) in Aikido, a Japanese martial art that he has practiced for more than 20 years. A condensed version of this essay was presented at a meeting of the Society for the Study of Philosophy and the Martial Arts at the Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association on April 10, 2009 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.*

## References

- Bargh, John A., & Melissa J. Ferguson. (2000). Beyond behaviorism: On the automaticity of higher mental processes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(6), 925–945.
- Bargh, John A., & Tanya L. Chartrand. (1999). The unbearable automaticity of being. *American Psychologist*, 54(7), 462–479.
- Boehm, Christopher. (1999). *Hierarchy in the forest: The evolution of egalitarian behavior*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- DeWaal, Frans. (1996). *Good natured: The origins of right and wrong in humans and other animals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Haney, Craig, Curtis Banks, and Philip Zimbardo. (1973). Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison. *International Journal of Criminology and Penology*, 1, 69–97.
- Hawkes, E. (2002). Showing off, handicap signaling, and the evolution of men's work. *Evolutionary Anthropology*, 11(2), 58–67.
- Hawkes, K. (1991). Showing off: Tests of a hypothesis about men's foraging goals. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 12(1), 29–54.
- Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer. (1999). *The woman that never evolved*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sapolsky, Robert M. (2005, April 29). The influence of social hierarchy on primate health. *Science* 308(5722), 648–652.
- Sherif, Muzafer, O. J. Harvey, B. Jack White, William R. Hood, & Carolyn W. Sherif. (1961). *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation the Robbers Cave Experiment*. Norman, OK: Institute of Group Relations.
- Tajfel, Henri, M. G. Billig, & R. P. Bundy. (1971). Social categorization and intergroup behavior. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 1(2), 149–178.
- Stevens, John. (1987). *Abundant peace: The biography of Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido*. Boston: Shambala.
- Stevens, John. (1992). *The art of peace*. (Morihei Ueshiba, Ed. and Trans.). Boston: Shambala.
- Wilson, Timothy D. (2002). *Strangers to ourselves: Discovering the adaptive unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zajonc, R. B. (1980). Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences. *American Psychologist*, 35(2), 151–175.

## Notes

1. These notions of “minimum harm” or “protecting the attacker” call for some comment as well. My perspective on this matter is that instead of breaking bones and dislocating joints, Aikido techniques allow the skilled practitioner to inflict levels of physical discomfort and exercise degrees of physical control sufficient to discourage and frustrate the attacker. Under most circumstances in civil society, it won't be necessary to inflict much harm to achieve this end. There will be some circumstances, though, where dislocating or breaking something might be necessary, and where such measures would count as minimum harm in relation to the genuinely deadly intent of the attacker. “Gentle,” in other words, depends on the circumstances. This perspective is far from universally shared among practitioners of Aikido. Some write and speak as if the attacker should experience no injury, harm, or damage whatsoever. I have doubts whether discouraging a determined attacker could ever be achieved with such a soft touch, but that, as well, is another issue.
2. *O'Sensei* is an honorific form of the Japanese word for teacher (*sensei*) which translates roughly as “great teacher.” The term is quite commonly used among practitioners of Aikido to refer to the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba.