

BOOK REVIEWS

PRACTICAL REASONING ABOUT FINAL ENDS

by **Henry Richardson**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xiv+326pp.

Reviewed by Eugene Garver

“Practical reasoning . . . cannot be usefully formalized as having a ‘logic’ of its own” (39). With that remark, Richardson shows why *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends* is of great interest to readers of this journal. It may not have a logic of its own, but it certainly does have problems of its own. We deliberate only about means, not ends. Reason is the slave of the passions. Reason can only tell us how to pursue our goals, not which goals to pursue. Maxims such as these suggest that *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends* is impossible, from which it follows that the choice of means is rational but amoral, while our grasp of ends may be moral but cannot be rational. Richardson’s stimulating book offers good news, showing how deliberation and rationality about ends are possible.

Richardson makes his case by removing the philosophical barriers and obstacles which lead us to think that deliberation about ends is impossible, and by narrating cases of practical reasoning best described as deliberation about ends rather than as a reduction to instrumental rationality. After an introductory section outlining the problem, he devotes three consecutive sections to what he calls the “scope,” “system” and “source” objections. “The principal obstacles are three: resistance to the idea that ends are subject to deliberation at all, insistence that rational deliberation must presume ends as criteria of decision rather than subjecting them to revision, and last-ditch conviction that an ultimate end, at least, lies by its very nature beyond the reach of practical reasoning to vary or adopt” (13). The last section of the book deals “with a new, fourth obstacle” encountered in “deliberation among people who deeply disagree” (18-19). Or, as he puts it later, “The scope obstacle indicates (1) that although ends are relevant in deliberation, it is not obvious that they are what deliberation is about, and (2) that ends are intimately connected with motivation as, say, ordinary beliefs or logical principles are not. The system obstacle credibly implies that ends are multiple and conflict with one another The source obstacle allows that some ends are more ‘final’ than others, in that they are recognized as regulating or overriding other ends, at least in certain contexts” (49). Constructive proposals about how deliberation about ends can be conducted mainly follow from his refutations, and from the rich examples he uses to make his case.

The scope objection maintains that deliberation about ends is simply impossible, that ends are what we deliberate from, and so they cannot be what we deliberate about. Richardson shows, in an argument similar to Aristotle's, that deliberation starts from ends given to us and develops, through normative reflective, chosen ends. I advance from wanting to achieve a goal of national security apart from my actions, and through deliberation and reflection, come to desire and choose courageous deeds for their own sake. I begin by wanting to be a doctor; the more I see about both becoming and being a doctor, the better law school looks. In the one case, it looks like I revise my given end by specifying and limiting it to what I can achieve myself, and in the other the revision makes me drop my initial end for one I now see as better. In both cases, my ends become more practical, more intrinsically connected to my actions, and so I revise ends through deciding what to do. Therefore I do deliberate about ends.

According to the system objection, rational deliberation about ends is doomed to fail because of the incommensurability of our diverse ends, from which we can escape only by having the rationality of deliberation turn putative given ends into means or aspects of some quantity of goodness to be maximized. I can deliberate, but not rationally. In a detailed refutation of Sidgwick's claim that rational choice presupposes commensurability, Richardson notes that our most and solid opinions about the good are concrete; there is no connection between the most authoritative and the most general claims.

Sidgwick's mistake . . . is to suppose that the self-evident starting points must stand as the few, highly general axioms from which all else may be deduced Sidgwick's misguided demand for an axiomatic practical science stems from his yoking together two features, generality and overridingness . . . that in fact can vary independently. Among normative judgments that stand most firm are some quite concrete, even particular ones In both the moral and practical arenas, the most concrete propositions are among the firmest. (138)

The deliberating agent, not an abstract impersonal principle, becomes the sovereign, like, again, Aristotle's *phronimos* or man of practical wisdom.

Finally, the source objection claims that deliberation about ends comes to a stop with ultimate ends, since justification must end somewhere. Even if some acts can be chosen for themselves, the idea that acts might justify themselves seems unlikely. Richardson shows how deliberation about ultimate ends does not reduce but enhances their motivational and normative character. Here Richardson's argument is reminiscent of Charles Taylor's Aristotelian claim that

. . . [t]he good life as a whole doesn't need to stand to the partial goods as a basic reason. There is no asymmetrical conferral of their status as goods. A good life should include, inter alia, some contemplation, some participation in politics, a well-run household and family. These should figure in their right proportion. But we can't say informatively that contemplation is a good because it figures in the good life. It is much more that this life is good

because, in part, it includes contemplation. . . .

. . . [A]rticulating a vision of the good is not offering a basic reason. (*Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 77).

When Aristotle speaks of happiness as the complete and final good, he does not think of it as the ultimate end which confers goodness on the activities done for their own sake which are also components of happiness. Not only are good activities not good because they contribute to happiness; they are not motivated by their contribution to happiness either.

Richardson's rebuttals and his positive descriptive narratives of deliberation about final ends are convincing. My main criticism is that he supposes that "the obstacles to recognizing the potential rationality of deliberation about ends are philosophical inventions" (xi). While he admits that "the nonphilosophical obstacles of interest, perversity, vice and stupidity will remain the most obdurate ones," he draws no connections between the philosophical and nonphilosophical obstacles. But these philosophical inventions don't take unless they serve some practical purpose. There are circumstances in which people are prevented from, or discouraged from, deliberating about ends, not because of bad philosophy but because of their practical circumstances. The arguments Richardson rebuts, and those he supports, serve practical purposes.

For example, Mill and Sidgwick deny the possibility of deliberation about ends by demanding commensurability as a criterion for rationality. They do so in order to secure the privacy of ends against demands that they be defended publicly, which they saw as threatening the diversity of experiments with living. There are times, I suggest, when denying rational deliberation about ends serves a practical and philosophical purpose. The same holds for Dewey's arguments against ends in themselves, which Richardson considers in some detail. Dewey thought that belief in ultimate ends and ends in themselves contributed to fanaticism, and so rejected a picture of practical reason because of its consequences. Others may object to deliberating about final ends because once ends are subject to deliberation, they may be secured by reason today, but will then be open to revision in the future, and some may think that it is safer to accept them without reason today in order to avoid the possibility of rational overthrow in the future. "All arguments must come to an end somewhere, Wittgenstein remarked. One way to put my present point, however, is that on the model I propose there is never any one particular place at which deliberative argument—or discursive practical reasoning—must come to an end. It is the sovereign deliberator who declares closure, as it were, not some ultimate principle" (182). This may not always be welcome news.

My point about the practical purposes and consequences of arguments for and against deliberation about final ends is a feature of practical reasoning Richardson should welcome. He turns in the last part of the book to a fourth obstacle to deliberation about final ends which is less philosophical and more evidently practical, the

existence of disagreement, and especially cultural disagreements. Richardson's treatment of this obstacle shows that there is a practical context and a practical point to the possibility of practical reasoning about final ends. Both his narratives and his philosophical retutations are more timely than his presentation might suggest. His narratives show the possibility—indeed the ubiquity—of moral agents as ultimate authorities (and ultimate ends) in a world whose diversity and whose abundance seem to cry out for the authority of rules. This is a book about practical reasoning which could not have been written in other eras.

There is another sort of formality about this book. Richardson shows the possibility of deliberation about final ends without saying what the final ends are. In one way this restraint is necessary, since he wants to reform our vision of practical rationality, and not to engage in such deliberation himself. But to discuss practical reason procedurally or neutrally is itself to presuppose a picture of practical reason not easily compatible with the substantive conclusions Richardson himself draws. Richardson's retutations of the three obstacles lead him to substantive conclusions remarkably like Aristotle's, and therefore at odds with what seems compatible with such procedural practical rationality. There is a difference between thinking of ultimate ends as persons, as Kant does, as states of affairs, with Bentham, or as activities, Aristotle does. Richardson shows that ends are things that people do for their own sakes, just as deliberation is "about what to do" (61). Just as "ends importantly define or individuate actions" (62), actions define and individuate our ends, including ultimate ends. There is a connection, in Aristotle and in Richardson both, between conceiving of our ultimate ends as activities and picturing the deliberating agent as sovereign rather than "some systematizing principle" (190). It is the sovereignty of the agent as opposed to principles that defeats the incommensurability or system objection. The ultimate end organizes and gives meaning to subordinate ends without justifying them.

Since it looks like Richardson reaches conclusions significantly similar to Aristotle's by a route very different from Aristotle's, it is worth asking briefly why Aristotle himself never worried about incommensurability or justifying ultimate ends, and why Richardson is a philosopher for our time. While Aristotle notoriously declared that we deliberate about means, not ends, he saw no irrationality of final ends looming as a consequence: incommensurability and tragedy were not problems for him. I believe that the reason is that for Aristotle the model of practical reasoning was deliberation, a form of deliberation rich enough to include most of what Richardson calls deliberation about ends. For moderns, the model of practical reasoning is justification, and practical reasoning is consequently procedural. It is making justification basic which invites the moral partisanship and consequent moral conflict, incommensurability and tragedy that are so pervasive today, and so absent in Aristotle. "Whereas the judicial model encourages one to imagine an institutionalized hierarchy of courts of appeal, the idea of practical reflection works better without any fixed division of the soul into parts" (141), and, I would add, without any fixed division of considerations into moral and extra-moral, and without leaving

anything outside the scope of deliberation, including our ends. Richardson's problem, which is our moral problem today, comes from the confrontation of those two distinct kinds of practical reason.

I began by suggesting that both reason and the good suffer from the segregation imposed on them by instrumental reasoning, which makes reasoning amoral and the good irrational. Richardson exhibits the rationality of goodness as he shows how rational our understanding and even choice of ends can be. Readers of this journal will hope for a sequel which addresses the converse problem and shows how practical reasoning can be ethical.

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KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

by Frederick F. Schmitt

London and New York: Routledge, 1992. Pp. x + 278. ISBN 0-415-03317-9.
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TRUTH: A PRIMER

by Frederick F. Schmitt

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Reviewed by Harvey Siegel

Although quite different from each other in subject matter and level of sophistication, these two books by Frederick F. Schmitt will both be of interest to portions of the readership of *Informal Logic*. *Knowledge and Belief* offers a complex and elaborate defense of externalism in epistemology, and (more specifically) of a reliabilist theory of epistemic justification. It will be of interest mainly to theorists, in particular to those informal logicians and argumentation theorists most concerned with the epistemological dimensions and presuppositions of these fields. *Truth: A Primer* is an introductory discussion of the main philosophical theories of truth, which defends a version of the correspondence theory. It would be useful in courses in informal logic/argumentation (as well as in philosophy) seeking a richer discussion of truth than those offered in standard texts. The former is really a book for specialists in epistemology; the latter a clear (albeit sophisticated) introduction, suitable for a range of introductory courses. Since the field of informal logic includes both those