

Ethics

Discussion

Reply to Peter E. Vedder, “Self-Directedness and the Human Good” (Fall 2007)

Defending *Norms of Liberty*¹

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Peter E. Vedder (2007) provides an excellent summary of the main tenets of our argument in *Norms of Liberty* (Den Uyl and Rasmussen 2005). However, Vedder has chosen to ignore that we are not claiming to be either interpreters of Aristotle or necessarily in agreement with him on all issues. Despite the fine summary, Vedder is unwilling to evaluate us on our own terms, but only through the eyes of Aristotle. This is fine, except that in Vedder’s discussion there is no philosophical account of what makes something good and thus why we should be in accord with the understanding Vedder, speaking for Aristotle, has of it. The attitude displayed is one of “Aristotle says X is good, therefore we must believe it.” That simply is not us, and it leads to rather silly comments later on (both on the part of Vedder and Aristotle) about how, for example, politicians necessarily have by nature the chance to live more flourishing lives than “moneymakers” do.

More valuable things are said by Vedder about moral psychology, and here is where one finds one of the two substantive criticisms of us. He claims that our view of human choice or self-direction not only is a rejection of the Aristotelian account but is, in fact, nothing more than a Kantian autonomous will. In response to Vedder, or anyone else inclined to understand “voluntariness,” “choice,” “will,” or “self-direction” this way, we wish to emphasize that we have made no such Kantian commitments in *Norms of Liberty*. Furthermore, we

go out of our way to suggest that we are not making such commitments. We do not believe there are untethered and dispositionless will acts made in complete freedom of antecedent conditions.² Indeed, our whole discussion of the “nexus” is meant to put such readings to rest. Moreover, we endeavored to use notions of self-direction in “common sense” ways not packed with a lot of philosophical baggage, because we believed that ordinary usage (say, ordinary common law usage of choice and intent) were sufficient to complete the political argument.

At the same time, we certainly do not hold with Vedder, or Vedder’s Aristotle, that there are these reified objective goods somewhere out there (and for some reason, “good”), with which, to enjoy or exhibit those goods, we must ally our dispositions to such an extent that we can think of doing nothing else.³ Both in terms of what makes something a good and in terms of the psychology associated with the exercise and pursuit of the good, our story would not be identical with the one Vedder tells of Aristotle.

Still, Vedder makes a good point that there is much more to do in discussing moral psychology, and that if we are not going to be Kantian in our use of “will” terms we need to do more.⁴ We plan to take the matter up on our next project. Nevertheless, we also do not believe a full unpacking of the phenomenon of choice will be devoid of “modern” elements. We are certainly mindful of the classical Aristotelian and Thomistic doctrines of disposition and appetite when we think of choice or self-direction. Yet, from what we see here, we are not convinced that Vedder has gotten Aristotle right either. This is mainly because Vedder equivocates on the term “freedom” or “free,” supposing it means “cannot” when in fact all he shows is that it means “will not.”⁵

The second substantive criticism of us has to do with our “inconsistency.” Vedder nowhere makes it clear in exactly what this inconsistency consists, so we are at somewhat of a loss to respond correctly. It looks to us like our “inconsistency” is to be found in our relation to Vedder’s Aristotle rather than with ourselves. If Aristotle is the standard and measure of truth, then of course any deviation would constitute an “inconsistency.” In this respect, our crime seems to be that we do not hold that the philosopher (or political philosopher) represents the highest form of human flourishing, which, if such

were true, would contradict our claims in support of the political order that protects multiple forms of flourishing. If this is the charge, we plead guilty.

What Vedder (2007, 173) actually says, however, is that “[t]he *authors’* doctrine of teleological eudaimonism proves to be incompatible both with *their* teaching concerning human equality and with *their* understanding of human freedom” (emphasis added). This statement suggests that Vedder has looked at things the way we do and found some inconsistency therein. No doubt our own attachment to what we have written may blind us in some respects here, but when we look at the matter what we see is that there is incompatibility between what we hold and *traditional* notions of teleology, perfectionism, equality, and ethical objectivity. Though Vedder does a fine job in outlining just what these doctrines are in our case, as far as we can tell, they are not taken seriously in the end, but simply measured against, or in terms of, classic positions in this history of philosophy.

We therefore do not see any internal inconsistency. Since the historically great philosophers possess superior minds to our own, it is perfectly fair to hold their teachings against ours and find us wanting, if such is the case. However, it is one thing to hold our efforts up to the conclusions of a great philosopher on similar topics and quite another to claim that one is inconsistent because those doctrines do not match those of some great philosopher. In the one case, presumably, defects are identified; in the other, all one has identified are differences with a presumption of mistakenness. Far be it from us to claim we see farther and deeper than such thinkers do; but that is not to say we do not see at all.

Notes

1. This reply is taken, with modifications, from our reply to Vedder that is part of a larger essay, “*Norms of Liberty: Challenges and Prospects*,” in Skoble 2008.

2. That we reject such a view should not be a surprise to readers of this journal. See Rasmussen 2002; 2006; 2007.

3. It seems that Vedder’s Aristotle reduces final causality to efficient causality.

4. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why we have endeavored in other essays (see n. 2) to become clear regarding what is involved in Rand’s understanding of human choice or volition.

5. Interestingly, the account of freedom or volition that Vedder touts as Aristotle’s is also the motivating force behind those interpreters of Rand who think that human choice must be premoral. The advocates of this so-called “official view”

think that if volition is inherently *for* human flourishing, then it is compelled and not free. Both Vedder and they fail to appreciate that natural teleology (final causation) is really a middle ground between compulsion and radical freedom.

References

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