

## Reviews

### *Rational Choice and Moral Agency*

David Schmitz

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*Review by Jennifer Roback Morse*

*Senior Fellow*

*The Hoover Institution*

*Rational Choice and Moral Agency*, a work of moral philosophy recently issued in paperback, can be read by two different groups with, I suspect, very different reactions. If I approach this work from my viewpoint as an economist, this book makes exciting contributions to the creative use of the Rational Choice paradigm. If I read this book from the viewpoint of Catholic moral theology, it seems quite emaciated by comparison with our standard Thomistic fare. I should say that neither of these two groups is the target audience for this book. David Schmitz, of the philosophy department at the University of Arizona, is writing for his colleagues—academic moral philosophers—not for economists or moral theologians. Nonetheless, I think both these latter groups can read this book with profit. Since I am not conversant with the current state of dialogue among moral philosophers, this review will concentrate on the perspectives of economics and moral theology.

Why might an economist find this book exciting? The Rational Choice paradigm usually employed by economists does not offer much in the way of moral intuition or guidance. These models typically define rationality as being internally consistent preferences and cost-minimizing behavior. If a person's rankings of goods and services is not self-contradictory, the person is said to be rational in the sense of having internally consistent preferences. A person is said to be rational in the cost-minimizing or economizing sense if he sets about achieving a given set of ends at the least cost to himself. The brand of utilitarianism used by economists does not usually concern itself with the choice of ends.

Because of these self-imposed constraints, most Rational Choice schol-

ars have difficulty saying much of substance about either morality or “the good life.” Rational Choice scholars typically take the person’s ends as given. What is more, few of these scholars are willing to commit themselves to a very “thick” conception of the characteristics of the human person, or to speak in much detail of what actually makes people happy. But ordinary people outside of academia confront the deepest moral questions in these very issues: “Which ends shall I pursue? What really makes me happy?”

This is what makes David Schmidtz’s book so refreshing. He enriches the Rational Choice paradigm by going beyond the distinction between final ends and instrumental ends. He suggests another type of goal that he calls the “maieutic end” that is achieved through a process of coming to have other ends. He offers as examples the choice of a career or the choice of a mate. Settling on a career is a kind of end, independently of the particular career one chooses. It is reasonable to focus on finding a spouse, quite apart from the particular person one chooses. Being settled on a career, being committed to a person, these are both valuable attainments. They are not quite final ends, nor are they exactly instrumental ends. All of Schmidtz’ examples of maieutic ends seem to have this in common: They are ends that give a person something worth living for, and to which, one can imagine being devoted.

Not coincidentally, these ends require a person to be committed to something or someone. Making and keeping this sort of commitment challenges the best within all of us. I suppose we all know someone whose career never got off the ground because she dithered over what specialty to choose, or someone who remained single because he could never find the courage to commit himself to another person. In the typical Rational Choice account of a human life well-lived, the discussion of commitment pales in comparison to the reality. These discussions characterize the primary benefit from commitment as allowing a person to make long-term contracts. But the reality is that people significantly change, precisely from the making and living out of their commitments. We change our preferences, what we are willing to consider a cost and a benefit, when we make a commitment to love another person. In fact, we can make an even stronger statement: A person can scarcely begin to make genuine moral progress until he signs his name on the line, so to speak, and commits himself to something or someone who might, in the end, prove disappointing. But this deep reality is hidden from the view of theorists who consider the person’s preferences as given and unchanging.

Moreover, the mentality that the Rational Choice paradigm seems to cultivate actively discourages this kind of attitude. Schmidtz correctly points out that the term *rational* operates as more than a description of certain behavior. The term *rational* implies an endorsement for an action, or offers a reason for an action. Rational Choice methodology suggests that one must carefully weigh costs and benefits of alternative courses of action, and choose the one that maximizes some predetermined function for producing happiness. This cautious weighing of alternatives, this attempt at projecting a whole stream of future consequences, are actually impediments to the kind of whole-hearted giving of the self required by a deep commitment. Commitments are scary precisely because we cannot predict what the commitment itself will do to us, not just how it will turn out, but how we will come to evaluate our entire life-situation. It would not be surprising if people became more apprehensive of making commitments under the tutelage of Rational Choice methodology.

For me, the concept of searching for reasons to live is David Schmidtz's boldest leap and greatest enrichment of the Rational Choice paradigm. In Schmidtz's scheme, having more things to live for is an overriding value to a person, over and above simply maximizing utility in some generic or undefined sense. Care about others, commitment to moral principles, participation in community, are examples of things that can be dealt with in his approach that cannot be so well-handled in the traditional framework. His approach is much richer than the average Rational Choice model, because he is willing to stick his neck out and commit himself to the proposition that people need to have something that gives meaning to their lives.

Once we allow ourselves to be convinced that this is an overriding goal for real human beings, we are in a position to discuss the content of preferences and goals. Schmidtz's framework gives us a basis for arguing that a person is objectively more rational to choose some ends rather than others. Schmidtz does not pursue this track as far as I would have liked, however. In his heart, I think he wants to say that there can be such a thing as an objective personal morality that can be defended as reasonable. Even if these particular "oughts" cannot strictly be derived from his hypothesized "is's," one might still be willing to accept these "oughts" and these rules as reasonable. But he stops short of this conclusion.

He takes on the question of whether it is rational to be moral. In other words, he attempts to construct an understanding of one's self-interest and an understanding of the demands of morality in which one would

rationally choose to adhere to the demands of the moral code. He structures his argument by weaving together an interpersonal strand of moral reasoning with a personal strand. The personal strand asks whether a given action is reflectively rational for an individual, while the interpersonal strand asks whether an action is collectively rational for the group. In explicating this structure, Schmidtz makes the very reasonable observation that moral theories can range over more than one subject matter and incorporate more than one rule for recognizing a morally required or morally prohibited act. The subject matter of the interpersonal moral rule is somewhat different from the subject matter of the personal moral rule, and it may well be that different kinds of criteria need to be applied. Using these two strands, Schmidtz attempts to argue that adhering to a moral law that is collectively rational can be understood to be personally rational as well.

I must say, however, that this is the part of the book that is disappointing. The moral choices he chooses to focus on are rather trite. His idea of a tough moral question seems to be whether it is immoral for a critically ill person to double park in front of a hospital. Presumably, we do not need an elaborate theory for questions of this kind: Even the officer charged with giving parking tickets can figure this one out. The theory would be more convincing if he had offered a few more challenging examples of conflicts between observing a legitimate moral rule and what appears to be one's reflective self-interest.

As I was reading this section of the book, I could not help recalling Catholic moral theologians who are willing to take on tougher questions. For example, Germain Grisez<sup>1</sup> confronts the question of whether the prohibition against lying can be waived in the following example: A woman has suffered a serious injury, and is about to undergo surgery. The doctors advise her husband not to tell her how desperate her situation is, for this information may upset her so much that her chances for recovery may be impaired. Should the husband tell the truth in response to her direct question about her condition?

Some might say that this constitutes a valid exception to the generally valid prohibition against lying, because the good of telling the truth is outweighed by the good of the woman's continued survival. Against this argument, Grisez observes that the assumption that telling her the truth will endanger her life is by no means a sure thing. The woman is no fool. She may very well see through her husband's transparent lies. Wondering what he is hiding may be more upsetting than the truth.

But more than that, Grisez proposes that the husband reason to himself as follows.

My wife is entitled to the truth about her condition, so that if she must die, at least she will not be unprepared. Moreover, if I lie now, I will be treating her differently than I ever have before and than she has ever treated me. I will be acting as if survival were the most important thing in our relationship. But it isn't. We are committed to the same things, and being truthful with each other is one of them. We believe that if we remain faithful to each other and to what God wants of us, our faithfulness will be rewarded in the long run. For me—and for her—it is a greater good to do what we believe to be right. But it is a greater *moral* good, determined by *moral* standards, not by trying to calculate selected short-term benefits and harms of particular options which can't really be weighed and measured against one another anyway.

The choice appeared to be “truth plus death” versus “lying plus life.” But that dichotomy does not exhaust the full set of ways in which the person can understand his options. We might even say that one of the primary tasks of moral reasoning is to help people to discover different ways of understanding their situation so that they have more options for acting. David Schmitz's theory of moral dualism, the interweaving of the personal with the interpersonal strands of moral reasoning, is one way to help people find ways out of apparent moral dilemmas. We can hope that he will apply himself to more examples of apparent conflicts between moral rules and self-interest in future works.

Nonetheless, readers of this journal are likely to find this work a useful attempt to bridge the apparent gap between rationality and morality. The greater the number of such bridges and the more compelling the arguments that underlie them, the better off we all will be. If our journal had existed in 1995 when this book was first published, we surely would have reviewed it at once. This kind of work, and dialogue with secular scholars like David Schmitz, are exactly the goals of this journal and the Center for Economic Personalism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, *Fulfillment in Christ: A Summary of Christian Moral Principles* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 63–69