

COMMENDATIONS AND QUERIES RE *LIBERTY AND NATURE*

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Let no one think that this admirable book is but another manifestation of the wearisome, and by now somewhat threadbare, tradition of present-day analytic moral philosophy! Far from it, for by its very title, *Liberty and Nature*,¹ Rasmussen and Den Uyl would proclaim at once their allegiance, on the one hand, to a decided libertarianism and, on the other hand, to nothing less than an updated Aristotelianism—neither one of which is to be very readily associated with ethics in the mode of so-called linguistic analysis. Thus, by the word “liberty,” Rasmussen and Den Uyl would signify their conviction that human individuals have a primary—yes, even, as they call it, a “meta-normative”—right to self-determination and self-direction in the entire range of their actions and choices. Further, by the word “nature,” they would signify that it is to no less than a *natural* right and *natural* law that individuals can appeal in justification of their right to such autonomy and self-direction.

This much said, one is then immediately inclined to go further and ask: “But how, in this day and age, can one any longer appeal to ‘nature’ in support of anything like moral and ethical claims? For ever since the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century, have we not had it drummed into us that the nature that gets investigated in modern science is a nature that is completely amoral, there being no such things as values, or natural ends, or distinctions between right and wrong, or good and bad, to be found anywhere in nature?” To which Rasmussen and Den Uyl would simply reply by noting that, just as we all recognize that there are quite objectively determinable differences between health and disease, or between being in a flourishing condition and one not so flourishing—and this, throughout the whole of animate nature—so why not likewise acknowledge

that, directly in our day-by-day experience of ourselves as human persons living in the world, we are continually being made aware of, and having brought home to us, the patent differences between two sorts of individuals: those who have so ordered their lives that they might be said to be living as truly intelligent and rational individuals ought to live, and those of whom it can only be said that they are nothing if not downright foolish and perverse in their actions and behavior—and often in their entire mode of life generally?

Let this then suffice, at least for the moment, as but a cursory explanation of what may be understood as the “nature”-pole in the title *Liberty and Nature*. What now of the other pole, the “liberty”-pole? For no less avowedly and unequivocally are Rasmussen and Den Uyl libertarians in their insistence that human individuals should enjoy an entire freedom and liberty in all of their choices and decisions in life, than they are Aristotelian in their insistence that the ground and basis of ethics is no less than nature itself, and more specifically human nature. And so, having taken a passing look at the nature-pole of their ethics, as Rasmussen and Den Uyl conceive it to be, let us now have a look at the liberty-pole.

In their championing of their libertarian ethics of liberty and of the freedom of the human individual to make his own decisions and to pursue his own ends and goals in life, Rasmussen and Den Uyl find themselves immediately up against the whole panoply of entrenched fashions in ethics—fashions that are not just prevalent, but even regnant, in present-day academic circles. It is this type of ethics that is fueled largely by arguments drawn from the so-called school of linguistic analysis in contemporary philosophy, and that, particularly in moral philosophy, traces its origins back to Kant on the one hand and to the utilitarians on the other.

More particularly, then, one might ask, “What is the particular message or instruction that these linguistic analysts would like to convey to today’s moral philosophers?” Presumably, it is a message that runs directly counter to the message that libertarian thinkers like Rasmussen and Den Uyl would like to convey in their ethics. For it insists that the human individual, considered as a moral agent, rather than devoting himself to his own concerns, and to pursuing his own ends and purposes in life, should rather discipline himself to be always and ever “other-regarding” rather than “self-regarding” in his conduct and behavior. As a result, the dominant fashions in ethics today have come to be largely those of an altruism, rather than any sort of egoism. Or, perhaps more accurately, one might say that the recommended stance for moral agents in today’s world should be a strict impartialism toward the interests and concerns of others, as compared with one’s own.

So far as Rasmussen and Den Uyl are concerned, what this all means is that in their efforts to uphold an ethics—call it a libertarian type of ethics—of liberalism and individualism, they cannot very well avoid facing

up to the challenge of the current varieties of altruism and impartialism that are still today so prevalent. Moreover, there is one key resource which the altruists and impartialists tend to rely upon in justification of their efforts to uphold their kind of "duty ethic," as it might be called, as contrasted with the sort of "desire ethic" favored by libertarians. This is none other than the resource which they think is afforded them by a so-called principle of universalizability—a principle which, incidentally, would seem to turn on no more than purely logico-linguistic considerations, as opposed to considerations that make appeal to the nature and being of reality.

In effect, what this principle states is that in all statements in which a person affirms no more than what his or her own interests, aims, ends, purposes, or objectives in life might happen to be—such statements are, as the going lingo has it, just not "universalizable." Thus, for example, the mere fact that I, let us say, happen to like this or that, or that I am concerned to try to achieve such and such ends or purposes in life, does not in any way imply that anyone and everyone else as well must therefore like or cherish the same purposes and goals as I.

But now contrast with sentences and affirmations such as the foregoing, which reflect no more than a particular individual's personal likings or desires or objectives, such other sentences as would contain what might be called properly "moral words"—words such as I "ought" to do thus and so, or it is only "right" that I do this or do that, etc. Clearly, in the case of sentences containing words implying a distinctively moral appraisal, there can be no denying that such sentences are universalizable—and this simply as a matter of linguistic fact. Thus, supposing it to be true that I ought to do thus and so, or that I have a right to do thus and so, it can surely be inferred from sentences to such effect that anyone and everyone else ought to do so as well, or that anyone and everyone else likewise would have such a right, given similar circumstances.

And now consider what the moral is, if you will, that the altruists and impartialists would draw from the applicability of the principle of universalizability in such cases. For they would say—and do say—that in any ethics which concerns itself, in libertarian fashion, simply with such things as the ends, purposes, goals, desires, and projects of human individuals, affirmations that might be made in the context of any such mere "desire ethic" are quite palpably not universalizable. And if they are not universalizable, then the statements and pronouncements made in the context of any such supposed ethics simply cannot qualify as properly moral or ethical statements at all. Nor will the key words contained in such statements—these being merely "desire words," as we are calling them—possibly qualify as "moral words," or words of moral import.

Accordingly, returning now to *Liberty and Nature*, just how do Rasmussen and Den Uyl propose to meet this kind of radical challenge to their ethics—a challenge which seems to do no more, and no less, than

apply the test of the principle of universalizability, with the result that the entire structure of libertarian ethics, as put forward by Rasmussen and Den Uyl, would appear to collapse, as if from but this single stroke! Of course, one device that Rasmussen and Den Uyl might resort to, in order to uphold their ethics of liberty, might be just to repudiate the principle of universalizability altogether. And they do indeed suggest at times that such is the course that they might be inclined to follow, supposing that course to be what it would take to salvage their ethics from the devastation that the linguistic analysts would wreak upon it. For let's face it, in the prevailing climate of present-day academic ethics, a "desire ethic," as contrasted with a "duty ethic," scarcely seems to be given even so much as the time of day!

Surely, though, a far sounder course for libertarian moralists like Rasmussen and Den Uyl to follow would be to question whether present-day moral philosophers may not have tended to confuse certain purely logico-linguistic restrictions connected with the use of particular words in the language, with various real restrictions as these might pertain to the actual facts of reality. Thus, suppose we grant that when mere "desire words" are used in sentences, the effect, linguistically, would seem to be that such sentences are not subject to what has come to be called universalizability. At the same time, the mere fact that such "desire words," turn out not to be universalizable in language surely does not necessarily imply that the objects of such desires in reality might not be the sorts of things that any and all human persons perhaps ought to desire, whether they actually do so or not.

For instance, just recall the well-known passage in Plato's *Euthyphro*,² where Socrates is represented as raising the question of whether things are said to be good because they are beloved of the gods, or whether they are beloved of the gods because they are and are seen to be truly good, or good in fact. Translating Plato's question into a language more consonant with purely secular talk in matters of ethics and morals: Is a thing to be called "good" merely on the ground that people happen to like it and desire it, or has the thing in question come to be desired because it is seen to be good, really and in fact?

Very well, suppose that in a given case we opt for the second alternative as being the relevant one. Surely, this must imply that the goodness or value or excellence of the thing in question is no less than an objective property of the thing. And once a thing's goodness or worth is thus recognized as being objective, will it not follow that the thing in question, so far from being something that just happens to be desired—say, by me—is rather something that ought to be desired? Moreover, since "oughts" are universalizable, as we have said, just like other "moral words," the conclusion follows that whatever it is that I desire on the grounds that I recognize it as being good—i.e., objectively good—must also be recognized as

being something that ought to be desired, and not just by me, but by anyone and everyone else as well, all things being equal.

Surely, though, this entire line of contention may now be seen to be nothing if not misguided, not to say even downright wrongheaded. For the error of so many of the linguistic analysts among today's moral philosophers is their assumption that, since mere "desire words" are not universalizable, any ethics oriented toward the achievement of any of the desired ends or goals that as human individuals we propose for ourselves cannot really qualify as being an ethics at all, because its propositions would not be universalizable. However, this entire line of argument on the part of present-day ethical altruists and impartialists, based as it is on mere linguistic considerations, just will not do. Instead, all one has to do is to go beyond considerations having to do only with the supposed purely linguistic behavior of both "desire words" and "moral words," and consider instead with Plato what the nature of the realities might be behind such words, that is, what such words are to be taken as pointing to or signifying. Then it will readily be seen that such "desire words" as are used to signify no less than what our ends and goals and purposes in life might be—these words can very well turn out to be universalizable after all.

Accordingly, an Aristotelian type of ethics such as Rasmussen and Den Uyl would subscribe to—i.e., an ethics which might be termed a "natural-end" ethics, and which maintains that all of our human actions and activities should be ordered to the attainment of just such a natural perfection and flourishing as befits a human person—such an ethics, for all its having the character of a "desire ethic," and not a mere "duty ethic," turns out to be, after all, an ethics whose propositions meet the test of the principle of universalizability. Nor will the strictures against such a version of a "desire ethic" put forth by present-day altruists and impartialists, with their avowed partiality for a "duty ethic," turn out to be other than baseless and without foundation.

Considerations such as those immediately foregoing have, in effect, returned us once again to that basic framework or structure which Rasmussen and Den Uyl have so brilliantly evoked, and then constructed their whole book around. For it now emerges that the Aristotelianism of the nature-pole of this ethics supposedly reinforces the liberty-pole, just as the libertarianism of their liberty-pole enables them properly to exfoliate what it is that the nature-pole, as they understand it, actually should and does involve. Indeed, separated or divorced from the context of a natural teleology of a more or less Aristotelian cast, there would be no proper basis in fact for the libertarian rights of individuals, which Rasmussen and Den Uyl are so eloquent in insisting upon. And no less so, take away the libertarian freedom of choice on the part of individuals that Rasmussen and Den Uyl are so insistent upon in connection with the liberty-pole, and the guidance and direction by nature as to the kinds of persons we human beings should

try to be and become would turn out to be a determination that is purely natural in the modern sense of "natural," and therefore not one that first needs to be understood, and then freely chosen and acted upon.

With this, though, and directly at the end of my discussion, I wonder if I might supplement my hitherto almost continuous commendation of this excellent book with at least the suggestion of a possibly disturbing question: Is there a possible ground for suspicion that Rasmussen and Den Uyl's libertarianism, which indeed would seem to fuel their entire discussion of liberty in their book, might be in conflict at times with their Aristotelianism, which presumably is the inspiration for their entire discussion of nature? Thus, prompted by their libertarianism, Rasmussen and Den Uyl do seem to suggest—even to insist—that an individual's life, morally and ethically considered, ought to be entirely self-directed and therefore a creation entirely of his own doing and making. At the same time, though, their Aristotelianism seems to lead them to suggest that nature, as it were, sets up no less than objective and seemingly external standards, which the human individual is under obligation to observe and to try to meet, whatever his personal inclinations and likings to the contrary might happen to be.

Is it not, then, at least conceivable that Rasmussen and Den Uyl are caught up in a certain inescapable tension between the notion of an individual's life as being entirely the product of his own self-direction and self-creation, and the notion of that same individual's life as being something that requires an ongoing and continuing deference to such external standards of human excellence and development as are set by nature herself?

Now this is not necessarily to say that if there is such a tension within any individual's life, in order to overcome it, an individual's supposed absolute right to an unimpeded self-direction of his own life must presumably occasionally give way to an "other-direction," such as would have to be provided by family, or friends, or the community, or whomever. Nevertheless, even if one stops short of violating libertarian principles to the extent of saying outright that sometimes and somehow an individual's right to self-direction has to give way to an actual other-direction—even if one refrains from ever going quite this far—still might not Rasmussen and Den Uyl have to admit that a libertarian absolute right of an individual to self-determination and self-direction is at best but a necessary and not a sufficient condition of that individual's leading the good life, or at least the kind of life that he, as a human being, ought to lead? And what, then, would Rasmussen and Den Uyl recommend as a possible way of converting such a mere necessary condition into a sufficient condition?

1. Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991).
2. Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10A.