

Editorial

Readers familiar with Anglo-American analytic epistemology are doubtless familiar with the concepts of *regress* and *coherence*, but since *Reason Papers* is an interdisciplinary journal, and both concepts are of relevance to this issue, a short primer on the subject may be in order.

A “regress” is an ordered series of questions and answers intended to establish the justification of some claim. Suppose, for instance, that you announce your intention to vote for Barack Obama in the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election. I ask you *why* you think Obama is the person to vote for, and you respond: “Because he’s the best of the available candidates.” I then ask you *why* you think he’s the best of the available candidates, and you respond: “Well, unlike the others, he has a genuinely presidential demeanor, an agile mind, and supports policies that are more obviously conducive to the general welfare than the others.”

Suppose that I persist with “why” questions of the same type: Why (I ask) *are* a presidential demeanor, agile mind, and welfare-conducive policies good reasons for electing a President? You might find that a somewhat odd or ridiculous question, but being an obliging and tolerant sort of person, you give a somewhat essay-like answer in response, having something to do with the nature of the presidency and the nature of politics itself. “Well,” you say, “the Preamble of our Constitution gives government a crucial role in advancing the general welfare, and the president literally presides over those functions of government most responsible for setting the government’s direction. So if the general welfare is in fact to be advanced, the person in charge of the executive branch of government has to have the right conception of government and its relation to the general welfare, and morally and intellectually be up to the demands of the office.”

We could, in principle, take this regress several steps further, and in various different directions. Eventually, however, the regress must come to an end: the chain of “why” questions must terminate in an answer that is no longer intelligibly susceptible of any more why questions. The interesting thing about a regress of justification is how it transforms the topic under discussion as the regress proceeds from beginning to end. We begin with a question about an individual choice, involving a specific person, a specific time, a specific place, and a circumscribed aim. We proceed, by iterated “why” questions, to answers that are simultaneously related to and at a remove from those specificities. On the one hand, each answer in the regress is related to its predecessors because each answer explains and justifies them. It’s *because* of what you believe about the nature of the presidency, politics, and the general welfare—and because you regard your beliefs about them as rational—that you decide to vote for Obama in the first place. On the other hand, each answer stands at a remove from its predecessors because each “why” question demands an answer that broadens the scope of the inquiry, and increases its abstractness. Having begun the inquiry with a question about

the merits of Obama-as-president, we end up having a conversation about the presidency as such, government as such, and the general welfare.

A regress, however, is only one of several different kinds of inquiries we might conduct in this context. Another one concerns *coherence*. Go back to the discussion about voting for Obama for president in 2012. You announce your intention to vote for Obama, and I ask why. You respond: “Obama is the best of the available candidates.” I ask: how so? And you respond, as in the previous example: “Well, unlike the others, he has a genuinely presidential demeanor, an agile mind, and supports policies that are more obviously conducive to the general welfare than the others.”

Now suppose that while I accept your criteria for the best presidential candidate, I wonder whether our agreement is substantive or merely verbal. In this case, I ask what you *mean*, say, by “policies conducive to the general welfare.” In order to have that conversation, we need to lay our conceptions of the general welfare on the table and make the conceptual equivalent of a pairwise comparison between them. That, in turn, requires that each of us tell a “story”—probably a fairly long and detailed one—about what we take “the general welfare” to be and how it is that something of that sort is to be promoted by government. Call this a question of *conceptual clarification*. Or suppose I accept both your criteria *and* their meaning, but want to know why it is that you think that *Obama* is the candidate who best exemplifies them. In that case, we have to compare notes on what we know about Obama from his track record, and report on what we find, comparing his track record with that of his competitors. Our reports may either agree or differ. If they differ, we need to figure out which report tells the better story by better fitting the facts. Call this a question of *hypothesis confirmation*.

“Coherence” denotes a relation between beliefs that have successfully passed tests of conceptual clarification and hypothesis confirmation. At a minimum, coherence requires consistency: no two beliefs can cohere if they contradict each other. In a more demanding sense, coherence involves a sort of mutual support: beliefs are coherent when they fit together in a single consistent system of beliefs, where the system has unity of some sort, and each belief plays a harmonious role, however major or minor, in a cognitive division of labor. In a yet more demanding sense, coherent beliefs bear strong conceptual relations to one another based on the content of the beliefs themselves: they entail one another, or explain one another, or bear some other kind of relation to one another that informs us about important similarities between things in the world. When it comes to coherence, then, the operative question is not the “why” of justification but the “what” of integration: what does *this* belief have to do with *those* ones? What does *each* of my beliefs have to do with the *others*?

Consider once again the inquiry about voting for Obama. In order to *clarify* the concept of “the general welfare,” I need to tell a “story” about it that fixes the referent of the concept while conveying a sense of its complexity. To grasp that complexity, I need to ask non-obvious questions about it, and have the answers to them. Since “obviousness” is a highly

subjective concept, I need to correct for my sense of the obvious by anticipating and/or fielding questions from others about it. To *confirm* some account of Obama's track record (as against that of the other candidates), I not only need to know the relevant facts (and why those ones are relevant), but need to put the facts into chronological order (what happened when?) and explanatory order (why did what happened happen as it did, and when it did?). And then I need to identify the sources of those facts, and be prepared to defend their reliability. Eventually, I have to put the whole story together in a single account that reflects the fact that each sub-inquiry in it is ultimately about the same thing: my political views.

The preceding account allows us to paint the portrait of the ideal epistemic (and discursive) agent. She has two essential features. On the one hand, she has mastery of the regresses that justify her beliefs. If you demand a justification of any of her beliefs, she has an answer to any legitimate "why" question you might ask of her, all the way down to the terminus of the regress for that belief. She knows where the regress ends, can explain why it ends where it ends, and feels no temptation to end the inquiry prematurely. On the other hand, she has mastery over the coherence of her beliefs as well. If you ask her for an account of the relations between her various beliefs—what they mean, how they're confirmed, how they relate to other beliefs in other domains—she has a coherent and interesting story to tell you about them. In fact, her having that story is less a function of your challenge to the coherence of her beliefs than of her own desire to keep them coherent. She "coherentizes" on her own initiative, just for the love of doing so—to expand the total stock of her beliefs so that they match the complexities of the world. She will, of course, need the help of others in the process of inquiry—for instruction, for testimonial evidence, for conversation, whether cooperative or adversarial—but ultimately, her epistemic achievement is her own.¹

We rehearse this primer lesson in epistemology because in an unexpected way, this issue of *Reason Papers* offers a case study (for lack of better terms) in regress-following and coherentizing. We don't mean, of course, that the issue is explicitly arranged in the form of a regress argument, or that our authors have deliberately decided to write as a collective mind to maximize the coherence of the claims within its covers. Nor do we mean that there's very much explicit discussion of epistemology in the issue. What we mean is that the inquisitive reader who reads *Reason Papers* 34, no. 2 cover to cover will likely be confronted with issues that lead him to ask the "why" questions characteristic of a regress of justification. Having done so, he might well be surprised to find that a "why" question provoked by one item in one

¹ Our discussion here owes a debt to Ayn Rand's account of epistemic virtue in her "The Objectivist Ethics," in Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: Signet, 1964), pp. 20-24. For further discussion, see Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1993), chap. 4. For a more conventional treatment, see Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

part of the issue gets a candidate answer in an item in a part of the issue devoted to an ostensibly unrelated topic. Something similar might be said of coherence. A reader interested in maximizing the coherence of his views on a topic discussed in one part of the issue might be surprised to find unexpected light cast on that topic from a discussion on an apparently “irrelevant” topic from inquiries in a supposedly “unrelated” discipline. The result is, so to speak, a lesson in epistemology very different from what one finds in most textbook discussions of the subject: a case study in regresses and coherence as they arise in real-life inquiries and controversies—of epistemology *in medias res*.

The issue begins with a Symposium on a relatively narrow topic—the merits or demerits of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. “What,” the Symposium asks, “is a Palestinian state worth?” Put another way: *Why have a Palestinian state?*

As Irfan Khawaja suggests in his Introduction to the Palestine Symposium, much of the answer to that question turns on local or specialized knowledge of interest to Israelis, Palestinians, and assorted policy wonks, but as Sari Nusseibeh suggests in *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?*—the book that inspired the Symposium—a full and satisfying answer to the question requires inquiries into more general topics. The value of a Palestinian state, after all, turns on the value of states generally. That prompts a more general question further down the regress: *Why have states?*

Three items in our issue address that question from divergent perspectives, none directly about Palestine, but each at least indirectly relevant to it. Daniel O. Dahlstrom’s critique of Alasdair MacIntyre’s quasi-anarchism suggests that states protect our security in ways that anarchies cannot (“Independence and the Virtuous Community”). Khalil Ahmad’s “Letters from Lahore” describes the frightening insecurity of life under a government unable or unwilling to defend the rights of its citizens against the onslaughts of an increasingly militant Islamist threat. And Gary Jason’s critique of contemporary American neo-secessionism highlights the weaknesses in the neo-secessionist case, with potentially interesting application to the example of Israel and Palestine (see Jason’s review of Donald Livingston, ed., *Rethinking the American Union for the Twenty-First Century*).

One plausible answer to our question about the need for states, then, is that we need them to protect the security of our *rights*, something that well-functioning states do better than any other institution. But that answer leads in turn to a deeper and more theoretical question. Rights are themselves a controversial concept, notoriously rejected by philosophers from Bentham to Marx to MacIntyre. And so, we’re led one step further down our regress: *Why have rights?*

Timothy Sandefur’s recent work on economic freedom offers at least part of an answer to that question. We need rights, he suggests, because life compels us to earn a living, and rights protect the living that we earn. It seems plausible enough to think that there is some close connection—whether in Nablus or Newark—between having to earn a living, needing the freedom to

earn it without coercive impediments, and needing protection against those who would unjustly seize the product of one's labors. David M. Wagner's review of Sandefur's *The Right to Earn a Living: Economic Freedom and the Law* examines the constitutional and legal issues involved in Sandefur's argument.

The "right to earn a living" presupposes the *need* to earn a living, and likewise presupposes the *obligation* to respect rights. But the concepts of "need" and "obligation" are at least as controversial as the claims of "rights" themselves, and Ayn Rand famously (or notoriously) claimed that all three norms share a common justification in the contribution they make to *life*. That brings us to what is arguably the most fundamental question in any normative regress: *What is the source of normativity?* Put somewhat differently, *what is the ultimate basis of practical judgments?* Or in Rand's terms, *what is "the ultimate value"?*

Ole Martin Moen's answer to these questions takes the form of an extended inquiry into Rand's "The Objectivist Ethics." Moen sketches Rand's argument for the claim that life is the ultimate value, attacks what he takes to be defective interpretations of her views, and offers a hedonistic interpretation of Rand according to which happiness plays a more prominent (or at least different) role than it has in previous interpretations (see Moen's "Is Life the Ultimate Value? A Reassessment of Ayn Rand's Ethics"). We hope to run responses to Moen's article in the near future by three authors whose work it discusses—David Kelley, Douglas Rasmussen, and Irfan Khawaja—followed by a response by Moen himself.

With *happiness*, then, we reach the terminus of the notional regress that runs like a thread through the issue. But considerations of coherence arise about the various subjects within each of the preceding regresses as well, and interestingly enough, our authors discuss these issues from diverse perspectives that enable the reader to "coherentize" on each of these topics in an interdisciplinary way.

Start with states. It's plausible enough to say that "we need the state to protect our rights," but "the state" is a misleadingly simple designation. For one thing, states differ: to speak of one is not to speak univocally of all. And the major differences between states concern the relative success with which they do what states are supposed to do—namely, protect our rights. When states fail at their appointed task, after all, they tend to fail more egregiously than just about any other institution on the planet. It's not enough, then, to say that states protect rights. We need a better sense of the mechanics of success and failure.

Scott Gerber's *A Distinct Judicial Power* discusses the historical development of what we now take to be a necessary constituent of a *successful* state—an independent judiciary. Joyce Lee Malcolm finds "much to praise" in the book, but in criticizing it, draws attention to the difficulties of addressing a complex topic from competing disciplinary perspectives. Several items in the issue discuss varieties of state *failure*. Book reviews by Thomas Hogan (of Jeffrey Friedman, ed., *What Caused the Financial Crisis*) and

Arnold Kling (of John Allison's *The Financial Crisis and the Free Market Cure*) each discuss the role of the state and/or market in generating the "Great Recession of 2008." Elsewhere, Glenn Garvin describes the abysmal dysfunctionality of the Cuban regime as recounted by blogger Yoani Sanchez (in *Havana Real: One Woman Fights to Tell the Truth about Cuba Today*),² and Khalil Ahmad, a blogger himself in a nation where people run the risk of death for that activity, describes the consequences of state failure in Pakistan.

Or consider rights. Many of our authors discuss rights, but none of them means quite the same thing by the term, and property rights constitute a major locus of disagreement. Sandefur's (and Wagner's) "right to earn a living" requires the protection of one sort of property right, but Dahlstrom's (and MacIntyre's) defense of the Americans with Disabilities Act involves a very different one. And as our Palestine Symposium makes clear, crucial issues in both historiography and practical politics turn on how we conceptualize and justify property rights in other contexts as well. Consider the case of land disputes in Israel and Palestine. What are we to make of the fact that Jewish settlers have regularly won title to Arab land—evicting its erstwhile owners—by invoking nineteenth-century versions of Islamic land law? Was Jewish settlement of Mandate Palestine during the Third Reich an invasion of Arab Palestine, or was it a benign influx of desperate souls with nowhere else to go? Is Jewish settlement of the West Bank an encroachment on Palestinian land, or is it merely a reclamation of vacant or underused land that would otherwise go to waste? Does the Palestinian Authority own all of the West Bank, or must it defer to Israel's claims of state ownership there? Are environmentally conscious Zionists more deserving of land than environmentally careless Arabs, or should Arab land claims, regarded as indigenous, always deserve a presumption of validity? Or is none of the above the correct answer in any of these cases?

There are no easy answers here, but three items in our issue begin to shed some light on related issues. In a discussion with obvious application to the history of Israel/Palestine, Lamont Rodgers insists (against Edward Feser) that the claims of justice apply to acts of initial appropriation ("Self-Ownership and Justice in Acquisition"). Meanwhile, Gordon Barnes disputes David Schmitz's claim that private property rights are a necessary condition of human progress, suggesting that alternative property arrangements might do just as well ("Property and Progress"). Finally, Dale Murray's review of recent work on Robert Nozick serves to remind us of Nozick's indispensable

² We note in passing that Sanchez was recently arrested—or in official Cuban parlance "deported" to her home—on the pre-emptive grounds that her presence at a public trial she wanted to cover as a journalist would have been an illegal provocation. She was released by the Cuban authorities after being detained for thirty hours. See Associated Press, "Cuban Blogger Yoani Sanchez Freed from Detention," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2012, accessed online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2012/10/06/world/americas/ap-cb-cuba-dissidents.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&r=0>.

contributions to our understanding of property rights (see Murray's Review Essay on Ralf M. Bader's *Robert Nozick* and Ralf M. Bader and John Meadowcroft's [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to Nozick's Anarchy, State, and Utopia*).

Normative theory tells us how things ideally ought to be, but normative concepts do not by themselves offer guidance on the complex question of how to get from the non-ideal conditions that we inhabit to the ideal conditions they recommend. That fact suggests that moral progress and political reform need careful and considered analyses of their own. Joseph Biehl's review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Honor Code* discusses the nature and mechanics of moral progress in cross-cultural perspective. In a previous issue of *Reason Papers*, Daniel Klein and Michael Clark articulated a pragmatic conception of libertarian political reform inspired by insights in Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek; in this issue, they defend that account against two critics ("Direct and Overall Liberty: Replies to Walter Block and Claudia Williamson"). By contrast, Walter Block's discussion of David Prychitko's work insists on a doctrinally uncompromising conception of Austrian economics, and an equally uncompromising approach to political reform ("Rejoinder to David Prychitko on Austrian Dogmatism").

One obvious threat to progress comes from dogmatism or fideism. The dogmatist is the negative counterpart of the ideal epistemic and discursive agent described above. Where the ideal agent has an answer to any legitimate "why" question you might ask of her, the dogmatist feels the need to delegitimize the task of asking or answering such questions, stopping every regress before it gets started. Where the ideal agent seeks to maximize the coherence of her beliefs by seeking confirmation for them from the world, the dogmatist seeks a form of pseudo-coherence by trying desperately to shut out the world. Religious fideism is a central theme not just in our Palestine Symposium, but in David Cook's review of Ibn Warraq's *Virgins? What Virgins?* and in Khalil Ahmad's letters on the Taliban. But dogmatism and group-think can take secular forms as well, as Stephen Hicks makes clear in his quick dissection of Carlin Romano's handwaving discussion of Ayn Rand's Objectivism (see Hicks's Afterwords article, "*America the Philosophical: Carlin Romano on Ayn Rand*").

Happiness, as remarked above, is a good candidate for the terminus of a regress of justifications, but as Aristotle aptly suggested, that fact, however true, seems vacuous until we get a clearer account of what *makes* us happy.³ It's a rare conception of human happiness that excludes the joys of music, so it's perhaps no accident that Aristotle not only uses so many musical examples to explicate the nature of happiness, but devotes so much attention to the role that music plays in producing human happiness.⁴ Nor, perhaps, is it

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), I.7.1097b23-25.

⁴ Cf. the famous lyre example at Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7.1098a7-15. On the

an accident that the metaphors we inherit from the Greeks for coherence and concord, in epistemology as in ethics and politics, are so often musical ones.

Dmitri Tymoczko's remarkable book, *A Geometry of Music*, pursues an apparently unrelated question: what is musical tonality and why do we enjoy it so much when we hear it? "It would make me happy," he writes, "to think that [my] ideas will be helpful to some young musician, brimming with excitement over the world of musical possibilities...."⁵ Tymoczko is right to be optimistic about that on purely musical grounds, but his book brims with excitement for non-musicians as well. For one thing, we *all* would like to know what's going on when we respond so powerfully to Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, or Blackmore. And if Aristotle is right, perhaps Tymoczko's claims about musical structure have something deep to teach us about the ostensibly non-musical parts of life that we feel compelled to describe by musical metaphors—e.g., epistemic and psychological harmony, moral measure, discursive counterpoint, political concord. In any case, we're privileged to have Roger Scruton as a guide to the complexities of Tymoczko's book, and to the complexities of the topic itself.⁶

Achieving the ideal of epistemic virtue is an ambitious aspiration for any of us, but the intellectual challenges we faced in editing this issue of *Reason Papers* induced both of us to take a few steps in its direction. We hope the intellectual challenges you face in reading it do the same for you.

Errata

We regret to note four errors in recent issues of *Reason Papers*.

(1) A block quotation from an article by Murray Rothbard quoted in Irfan Khawaja's review of Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism* incorrectly capitalizes the word "libertarianism" (*Reason Papers* 31 [Fall 2009], p. 154). In fact, Rothbard uses the lower case "l" throughout his essay. The error seems to have arisen from the editors' imprudent reliance for proofreading purposes on the version of the Rothbard passage quoted in Peter Schwartz's "Libertarianism: The Perversion of Liberty." Schwartz systematically capitalizes the "l's" in every instance of the word "libertarianism" in his

role of music in well-being generally, see Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), VIII.5-7.

⁵ Dmitri Tymoczko, *A Geometry of Music: Harmony and Counterpoint in the Extended Common Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. xviii.

⁶ For the companion site for Tymoczko's book (with audio files keyed to examples in the book), go to: <http://www.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780195336672/examples/?view=usa>.

article, altering direct quotations where the “l” appears as lower-case in the original text.⁷

(2) The Editorial for *Reason Papers* 33 (Fall 2011) inaccurately makes reference to Daniel Klein and Michael Clark’s account of “direct and indirect liberty” (p. 10). The correct phrase is “direct and overall liberty.”

(3) Irfan Khawaja’s review of Tariq Ramadan’s *What I Believe* inaccurately states that “the Bush Administration cut funding to the anti-Soviet resistance (“*mujahidin*”) in 1989, and left office in 1992...” (*Reason Papers* 33 [Fall 2011], p. 184). In fact, though the bulk of funding was cut in 1989, some residual funding persisted until 1992. The substantive point made in the passage stands, however.

(4) In Carrie-Ann Biondi’s “Descending from King’s Cross: Platonic Structure, Aristotelian Content,” a parenthetical comment about the *Harry Potter* characters Ron and Hermione confusingly describes them as “now married to each other with families of their own” (*Reason Papers* 34, no. 1 [June 2012], p. 73). The phrase should, of course, read: “now married to each other with a family of their own.”

Irfan Khawaja
Felician College
Lodi, NJ

Carrie-Ann Biondi
Marymount Manhattan College
New York, NY

www.reasonpapers.com

⁷ Compare Murray Rothbard, “Frank S. Meyer, The Fusionist as Libertarian Manqué,” *Modern Age* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1981), p. 355, with Peter Schwartz, “Libertarianism: The Perversion of Liberty,” in *The Voice of Reason: Essays in Objectivist Thought*, ed. Leonard Peikoff (New York: Meridian, 1990), p. 315.

