

Reason Papers as a Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Edward W. Younkins
Wheeling University

Fifty years ago, Tibor R. Machan did the world a great service when he founded *Reason Papers* as a journal of interdisciplinary normative studies based on objective academic scholarship. Although there is one reality or truth, there are a variety of complementary and ostensibly competing disciplinary paths to it. This journal has ably served as a forum for inquiry and debate across a wide spectrum of views rather than as an instrument of one particular ideology. As a scholarly journal, *Reason Papers* has played a significant role in fostering intellectual discourse within the realm of philosophy, especially as related to other disciplines. Articles in this journal have frequently mediated disagreements that have arisen from various perspectives and approaches. Through its publication of articles, symposia, discussion notes, review essays, and book reviews, *Reason Papers* has fostered a dynamic intellectual community committed to the rigorous examination of ideas about a free society, frequently, but not exclusively, from neo-Aristotelian, Objectivist, or libertarian perspectives.

Reason Papers recognizes the serious need for unifiers who can integrate knowledge and build bridges within and between various disciplines. It is an outlet for people whose systematic project is to integrate disciplines and to discover unity. Interdisciplinary work produces knowledge that integrates two or more disciplines. Transdisciplinary work is concerned with that which is, concurrently, between disciplines, across disciplines, and beyond all disciplines. These approaches are indispensable complements to the disciplinary approach. Although specialization is good and necessary, there is also a need for systemic thinking and the synthesis and integration of knowledge. It is up to context-keeping individuals investigating from a variety of perspectives and at different levels of generality to make connections among seemingly disparate disciplines and to construct the

unity, coherence, and value of knowledge. Rational individuals can bring together long-separated fields of inquiry to provide new insights and provide big-picture wisdom.

Reason Papers acknowledges that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to draw rigid boundaries between disciplines. Because of the nature of reality, lines between disciplines are blurred and permeable. We live in a universe of natural laws that is orderly and intelligible. Reality as a whole and the entities that comprise it are subject to natural laws. All knowledge is thus bound together within the limits of our spatially and temporally finite universe. In such a universe, boundaries blur, fields intersect and overlap, and connections are amplified as integration becomes the goal. There are many commonalities among disciplines. Knowledge gained within one discipline may be seen to coincide with knowledge gained from other disciplines. This should not be surprising, as explanations of various types of phenomena existing within the same universe should be connected and consistent with one another.

Disciplinary boundaries are useful, but they are conceptual conveniences or analytical abstractions. Because of the nature of reality, which is not a number of compartmentalized units, it is impossible to totally separate subjects when doing analysis. Because no field is totally independent of other fields, there are no discrete branches of knowledge. There is only cognition in which subjects are separated out for purposes of study. Although we do have to subdivide reality in order to study an aspect of it, we need to reintegrate at the end of our analysis what we learned with what we already know. There is thus a need to think systemically, look for relationships and connections between components of knowledge, and aspire to understand the nature of knowledge and its unity.

By their very nature, *Reason Papers* symposia are particularly interdisciplinary. They not only facilitate intellectual exchange by bringing together scholars with diverse perspectives and expertise, but also serve as platforms for the dissemination of knowledge and scholarship, contribute to the development of a vibrant intellectual community, encourage scholars to engage with one another's work, and, most importantly, explore key issues and controversies in depth. Beginning with Volume 42 in 2022, *Reason Papers* changed its focus to the publication of symposia in order to encourage greater dialogue and the wider exchange of ideas around a central essay, book, or theme. To date, thirty-one symposia have appeared in *Reason Papers*. Three of my favorite symposia discuss books authored by neo-

Aristotelian philosophers Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, whose philosophy has been labeled “Individualistic Perfectionism.”¹ This trilogy of books warrants summary:

(1) Rasmussen and Den Uyl’s *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order*² offers a compelling exploration of classical liberal thought through an Aristotelian lens, despite the fact that Aristotelian thought has frequently been understood as hostile to a liberal or commercial society. “The Dougs” (as many refer to them) argue that individual liberty is not only compatible with human nature, but also essential for human flourishing. They demonstrate that the Aristotelian approach to ethics supports natural rights, which form the logical and realistic basis for liberal principles. Drawing on Aristotle’s philosophy, they present a robust defense of the liberal order, emphasizing the importance of autonomy, self-realization, and the pursuit of excellence. This book challenges traditional critiques of liberalism and provides a fresh perspective on the philosophical foundations of a free society.

(2) Den Uyl and Rasmussen’s *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics*³ delves into the relationship between perfectionism and liberalism, exploring how a perfectionist approach can complement liberal principles. They argue that a focus on human flourishing and self-realization aligns with the core values of liberalism, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding and promoting individual freedom. Through nuanced analysis and engaging arguments, they advocate for a “perfectionist turn” in liberal theory, challenging conventional wisdom and expanding the horizons of political philosophy. This book extends their thesis—from

¹ For the symposia on these three books, see *Reason Papers* 18 (Fall 1993); *Reason Papers* 39, nos. 1 and 2 (Summer and Winter 2017); and *Reason Papers* 42, no. 1 (Summer 2021).

² Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991).

³ Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

Liberty and Nature and *Norms of Liberty*⁴—that liberalism is a political philosophy of metanorms, not one providing specific norms that guide personal moral conduct. In it, they make a convincing case that the individual is at the center of ethics; they explain how ethics can be independent of, yet in harmony with, politics. They maintain that a neo-Aristotelian ethical framework (as expressed in their theory of individualistic perfectionism) is consonant with a liberal, non-perfectionist political theory. They also argue that ethical and political theories should be firmly integrated with an overall philosophical system, and they propose two perspectives from which to analyze ethical theory: respect and responsibility. These are not theories of ethics, but rather, frameworks or approaches within which moral theorizing occurs.

(3) Rasmussen and Den Uyl's *The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism*⁵ marks a significant shift in liberal theory, advocating for a more realistic and grounded approach to political philosophy. Critical to Rasmussen and Den Uyl's explanation of metanormative individual rights and an ethics of individualistic perfectionism is metaphysical realism, which is the conviction that man and the world exist apart from our cognition of them and that people can know their nature. In this book they provide the foundation for both individual rights and individualistic perfectionism by defending metaphysical realism. In *The Realist Turn*, Rasmussen and Den Uyl note the many insuperable problems constructivism faces and why metaphysical realism is a much stronger position. They dispute the notion that it is not possible to know the nature of reality and that knowledge is only of our constructions—be they mental, linguistic, or social.

As you can see, the work done by the Dougs has deeply impressed me. Reading the symposia on these three books has been intellectually stimulating and has shaped how I approach some of my own work. This would likely not have been possible without the

⁴ Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

⁵ Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, *The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

invaluable opportunity provided by *Reason Papers* to think outside disciplinary boxes.