

Reason Papers: Living Up to Its Name

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I initially encountered *Reason Papers* in my first year as a graduate student at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). I was working on a paper on Aquinas, Aristotle, and natural rights, and my search of Philosopher's Index revealed an almost entire journal issue devoted to discussing Aristotle and natural rights—the Fall 1993 issue of *Reason Papers*. The essays in that issue were uniformly excellent; I also noted that both the Guest Editor (Fred D. Miller, Jr.) and one of the contributors (Jeffrey Paul) were faculty members of the Philosophy Department at BGSU. I had clearly chosen the right graduate program! The impression that Bowling Green was a good fit for me was confirmed when I quickly discovered a Special Issue (Spring 1989) of *Reason Papers* on the work of Loren Lomasky, who was also then a member of the BGSU Philosophy Department.

Reasoning that any journal that publishes issues that focus on Aristotle, natural rights, and Lomasky's work, will have more papers of interest to me, I began working my way through prior issues of *Reason Papers*. In so doing I was unknowingly securing an education in the state of the best of libertarian thought at the close of the twentieth century.

Reason Papers's influence on my intellectual development extended beyond introducing me to academic libertarianism. Through the author-and-critics exchanges that it published in its Symposium issues it provided me with a model for scholarly debate. To my knowledge, without exception the critics of the works discussed in these issues attempted to portray the views of the authors charitably, with their subsequent criticisms aimed not at scoring intellectual points, but at moving the discussion forward. Intellectual humility—the recognition that no one has a monopoly on the truth and that some of what one believes is false—was always observed. For example, in criticizing one part of Lomasky's derivation of basic rights, Christopher W. Morris (at the time, another Bowling Green Philosophy Department faculty member!) noted that he was not quite sure that he

had understood Lomasky's argument correctly, and so (we can infer) it might be that his objection misfires.¹ Such intellectual honesty is also displayed by Lomasky, who, in the work criticized by Morris, explicitly recognizes (as Morris notes) that the argument that he developed "does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that he wishes to derive."² Similarly, in responding to Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl's argument for natural rights, Eric Mack prefaces his criticisms by noting that he is "not at all confident that [his] criticism of their argument is based upon a correct understanding of it," going on to observe that if his "criticism is based upon misunderstanding, then at least it may still have the beneficial effect of eliciting clarifications about the true structure of the argument."³ In response, Rasmussen and Den Uyl charitably hold not that "Professor Mack has exactly misunderstood our position so much as that he has filtered it through his own conceptions of ethics and political theory."⁴ It was clear that what mattered in these discussions was not winning the argument, but getting things right. Ideas, not egos, were what mattered. This is academic debate as it should be—and *Reason Papers* contributed much to academic discourse by modeling this.

The exchanges in *Reason Papers* that modeled this ideal had a significant influence on my approach to academic work, an influence that I hope was on display in the Symposium issue of *Reason Papers* that focused on my *Markets with Limits*.⁵ There, in response to Jeppe von Platz's excellent criticisms, I acknowledged "two shortcomings" in *Markets with Limits*, including that at times I was unclear, such that a reader of my work could be led to believe that I endorsed inferences that I did not endorse. As they stood, my arguments might appear to justify "moving from the observation that the justifying aim of the practice of academic research is the enhancement of understanding to the claim that . . . the actions of its practitioners should aim at this."⁶

¹ Christopher W. Morris, "Loren Lomasky's Derivation of Basic Rights," *Reason Papers* 14 (Spring 1989): p. 89.

² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³ Eric Mack, "Rasmussen and Den Uyl on Natural Rights," *Reason Papers* 18 (Fall 1993): p. 89.

⁴ Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, "Reply to Critics," *Reason Papers* 18 (Fall 1993): 123.

⁵ James Stacey Taylor, *Markets with Limits: How the Commodification of Academia Derails Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁶ James Stacey Taylor, "Blame, Rot, and Commodified Research: Responses to My Critics," *Reason Papers* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2022): p. 57. I was responding there to Jeppe von Platz, "Fable of the Deans: The Use of

Just as von Platz's criticisms pressed me to clarify and improve my arguments, so too did Jeffrey Carroll's and Chad Van Schoelandt's engagement with my work help me advance it and did so in a way that complemented each other's responses.

One of my aims in *Markets with Limits* was to suggest ways to improve the quality of academic work. Carroll contributed to this discussion by noting that academics could be either Innovators or Regulators. Innovators "seek to expand knowledge by saying something that has not been said," while Regulators vet "ideas for rigor, clarity, consistency, originality, and whatever other methodological desiderata are appropriate."⁷ Carroll recognizes that "the looming objection is that departments will all want innovators."⁸ This, too, was my primary objection to this proposed academic division of labor. After all, to describe an academic as "meticulous" is widely recognized as code for calling them an uncreative "plodder."⁹

Here is where Van Schoelandt's argument in that Symposium issue of *Reason Papers* comes into play. Quoting Ryan Muldoon, Van Schoelandt observes that people "understand the world through mental schemata or 'bundles of expectations, judgments of salience, interpretive norms, and emotions for classes of situations'."¹⁰ Shared schemata provide people with a framework for understanding events, which assists in coordinating their expectations and behaviors.¹¹ Schemata can change, leading to changes in behavior. Van Schoelandt notes that deliberate attempts to affect such schematic and behavioral changes are more likely to be successful in smaller groups and if the desired changes involve a shift not to radically different schemata but

Market Norms in Academia," *Reason Papers* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2022): pp. 19–32.

⁷ Jeffrey Carroll, "Wozzles: Who Is to Blame and What Can Be Done? Reflections on Taylor's Prescriptive Project," *Reason Papers* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2022): p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁹ Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Dean's List," *The New Yorker* (June 3, 2001).

¹⁰ Chad Van Schoelandt, "Perspectives and the Limits of Markets," *Reason Papers* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2022): p. 35; Ryan Muldoon, *Social Contract Theory for a Diverse World: Beyond Tolerance* (New York: Routledge, 2016): p. 50.

¹¹ Van Schoelandt, "Perspectives and the Limits of Markets," p. 36.

to one that is already adjacent to that which is intended to be replaced.¹²

The shift from understanding “meticulous” to be code for a plodder to understanding it to refer to a valued regulator need not be as great as it might at first appear. There are many examples of academics coming to prominence as a result of their subjecting others’ “innovative” work to regulatory scrutiny and finding it wanting. For example, as Aeon Skoble notes in a review penned for *Reason Papers*, Mary Lefkowitz’s scholarly fact-checking of the claims made by Martin Bernal in support of the “stolen legacy” view concerning Black Egyptian culture “fanned the flames of controversy” and secured her scholarly acclaim (although not, as Skoble acknowledges, in all ideological quarters).¹³ Combining this observation concerning the esteem in which regulators such as Lefkowitz can be held with both Carroll’s suggestion about the division of academic labor and Van Schoelandt’s observations concerning the efficacy of effecting changes in schemata, leads to a practical suggestion to improve the quality of academic work: Focus on cases where academic regulators have secured academic success, thereby helping to shift the academic schemata to laud regulators as much as innovators, and then enjoy the increased accuracy of academic work subject to increased regulator scrutiny.

I thus have much reason to be thankful to *Reason Papers*. It has modeled productive academic discourse and has pushed me to clarify, correct, and develop my own views by providing others with the opportunity to publish criticisms of it in a Symposium issue. And, of course, by being a Diamond Open Access journal it exemplifies the noncommercial, academic norms that should guide all academic work!

¹² Van Schoelandt, “Perspectives and the Limits of Markets,” pp. 47–48.

¹³ Aeon Skoble, “Review of Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa*,” *Reason Papers* 21 (Fall 1996): pp. 88–90, quotations on p. 88.