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Commentary on: Michael Baumtrog’s “Considering the role of values in practical reasoning argumentation evaluation”

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There are many standards by which we judge actions. A perennial question in our fields is about how many of those standards are to be included in the analysis of the reasoning undertaken to arrive at those actions. Maybe we’re hearing the echo of the Greeks, or maybe we’re remembering how critical thinking and informal logic grew out of dissatisfaction with traditional logic courses. Or maybe we’re just recognizing the many values that we capture with the word “reasonable.”

It’s not easy to get the word “reasoning” to map onto all that we call “reasonable.” It’s particularly difficult when what we’re trying to highlight about “reasonable” is where it overlaps with “moral.” We do often take the moral to be reasonable. But the range of the overlap is fairly narrow. When the reasonable is moral, usually, the contrast is with some act of immoral anger or passion. “He took your parking spot, yes, but that’s no reason to kill him—be reasonable!” We can think of a lot of examples like that, but usage is strained when we talk of the unreasonableness of other kinds of immoral action. If your brother was thinking of embezzling from his employer, it wouldn’t be quite right to beg him to instead to “be reasonable!” Nor would we urge him to “be rational!” unless what we meant was simply that he is bound to be caught. What I’m questioning here is Mr. Baumtrog’s initial assumption, inspired by Walton, that the immoral is irrational or unreasonable. I don’t claim that everyday usage ought to be the last word in these things. What I do claim is that there’s something forced in pinning together, across the board, rationality, reasonableness, and morality.

Mr. Baumtrog pins these together with an admirable motivation that I want to highlight. It’s not merely that he wants to find a way to say of someone who performs an immoral act that he reasoned poorly. It’s that he wants to build questions about the morality of our means and ends into our own attempts to reason well about what we do. Nothing could be more important. Consider, though, a very straightforward way to do this: We conceive of a goal, figure out how to achieve it, and then simply ask ourselves, “And is it morally permissible?” What does that lack as a way of figuring out how to go on? Presumably, for Mr. Baumtrog, the lack shows up when we see how we in fact behave. We do immoral things after planning them out, and nothing in the planning stage stopped us. Maybe we could work moral considerations more centrally into our planning, not merely as an afterthought—then reasoning better could lead to us being better.
(Let me take a moment to point out a possible side effect of this line of inquiry. Typically, we entertain the possibility that an irrational actor is less responsible for the bad things he does. Indeed, Breivik’s rationality was a topic of great controversy in the days following his horrendous deeds. He was at first diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. We do not tend to pin rationality to morality across the board, but where we do pin them together, we also tend to pin irrationality to lack of responsibility. That’s murky, and we could use some careful thinking about it, as a culture. I mention it just to point out one danger of forcing the identification of the rational and the moral—it might unintentionally put more strain on the idea of responsibility for immoral conduct.)

Now then, why doesn’t the immorality of our intended actions show up more readily in the planning stages? It’s largely because our means and ends are always already expressions of the values we harbor. If I’m trying to figure out how to cheat on my taxes, I’ve already accepted it as a legitimate thing to do. My values motivated my attempt to cheat in the first place. Some lucky reflections on the way my cheating hurts others, or on the likelihood of getting caught, may get me to change my plans, especially if my plan was hastily conceived, and especially if I also value not hurting others or not getting caught. Breivik, apparently, planned his actions for almost a decade, and his plans were elaborate. I think that it is fair to say that additional reflection would not have changed his mind. He did a very bad thing. What does it add to say that he reasoned poorly? I don’t see any hope in the idea that he might have turned away from his horrible plans, if only he had reasoned better.

What Mr. Baumtrog wants, I think, is for better reasoning to be morally improving. But reasons alone can almost never get someone to change their values, because beyond an appeal to widely accepted standards of right and wrong, there’s no way to demonstrate to someone that they’re about to do something wrong. Sometimes a well-placed reminder of our widely accepted moral standards is just what one needs—perhaps in the flurry of details one has lost sight of the moral weight of one’s plans. But for someone who is already planning in earnest to act in ways which flaunt our standards, no such reminder will work. And if there’s nothing we can do to change such a mind with reasons, then there’s nothing we can incorporate into the analysis of reasoning that would help us to so change our own minds.

Should we be more demanding of ourselves, morally, while choosing ends and arranging means? Absolutely. Mr. Baumtrog is modest in pointing out our genuine failures as theorists on this count. In the normal course of things, it rarely occurs to us that our actions may be wrong. We just go about our business, doing what we need and want to do. How our actions hurt others, how they hurt ourselves, how they encourage others to act wrongly, how they erode moral feeling, how they foreclose better action later, how they blur our understanding of goodness, all of this should be more on our minds. And all of it should be built more centrally into the accounts we give of practical reasoning. Mr. Baumtrog is right about all of that, and we should take up his banner. But where there is no clear agreement on what counts as right, when what one wants to do flies clearly and intentionally in the face of widely accepted values, then there’s not much to gain from adding the charge of
unreasonableness to immorality. Good reasoning can help good people to be better, but it can’t make bad people good.