

Stillborn Ends

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Introduction

According to instrumentalism, practical rationality consists of identifying the most effective means to our ends, but those ends cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny. In keeping with Hume's view that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions," ends are understood as determined by desires alone, without reference to reason.¹ This instrumentalist limitation on the role of rationality in human action has worrisome implications for ethics, in that it seems to permit any ends whatsoever. If no ends can be endorsed or vetoed by reason, then all possible ends are equally arbitrary and equally legitimate. Only means to ends could be excluded or criticized as irrational when somehow inappropriate to some desired end. So Joe could be faulted for lying to his friend—but only insofar as he values his friend's trust. Similarly, a murderous husband might be faulted for failing to adequately conceal his unfaithful wife's body since he wished to kill her without suffering punishment—but not for the jealous rage that drove him to murder. The instrumentalist view of practical reason seems to reduce morality to mere prudence—in the pursuit of whatever objects a person happens to desire. Alternatively, some ultimate end (or ends) might be asserted as obligatory without rational justification, as with claims that ends should be set by natural sentiments, social conventions, or divine commands.

In "Choosing Ends," David Schmitz aims to develop a "more reflective model of rationality" than that instrumentalism, one in which ends could be rationally chosen, revised, and even rejected.² To do that, he introduces the concept of a "maieutic end" (i.e. "an end achieved through a process of coming to have other ends") to the standard instrumentalist model of practical rationality.³ Schmitz claims that maieutic ends make possible "a chain of means and ends whose final link is rationally justified."⁴

In this paper, I will argue that Schmitz's maieutic ends fail to deliver the promised goods. Their initial plausibility is based on a muddled and loose understanding of final ends. Once that is clarified, maieutic ends are no longer a distinct kind of end: their function can be understood purely in terms of instrumental and constitutive means to ends. Moreover, maieutic ends cannot justify any genuine final end by reference to the facts: they merely tie up the "loose ends" of an arbitrary unchosen end. So the addition of maieutic ends to the standard instrumentalist model does not eliminate the threat of moral relativism.

Maieutic Ends

On an instrumentalist model of practical rationality, human action is understood in terms of a hierarchy of means and ends. The means to ends may be instrumental to the end (i.e. for the

¹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2.3.3

² David Schmitz, "Choosing Ends," in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Milgram (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 237.

³ *Ibid.*, 239

⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

sake of it) or constitutive of the end (i.e. a particular aspect of it). So eating a salad would be a constitutive means to eating lunch and an instrumental means to satisfying hunger. Most ends will be relative rather than final ends, meaning that they are also means to further ends. So the relative end of satisfying hunger would be an instrumental means to the further end of a productive afternoon of work. Such chains of means and ends form a hierarchy that terminates in one or more final ends, i.e. the ultimate good(s) pursued solely for their own sake. Such final ends are not justified in instrumentalism.

To explain the origin of final ends in rational terms, Schmitz adds the concept of a “maieutic end” to this general framework.⁵ He defines a maieutic end as “an end achieved though the process of coming to have other ends.”⁶ So in his example, a surgeon Kate does not arbitrarily choose her specialty of surgery as a final end, but rather comes to value it as such through a maieutic end.⁷ Prior to choosing surgery, Kate “wanted to settle on a career and thus on the goal or set of goals that a career represents.”⁸ That goal of choosing a career was a maieutic end: it generated the final end of an actual career in surgery for Kate. So as the term “maieutic” (for midwifery) suggests, “we give birth to our final ends in the process of achieving maieutic ends.”⁹

These maieutic ends, Schmitz argues, add something new to the standard instrumental toolkit. They are not merely some further final end that transforms a person’s seeming final ends into mere means.¹⁰ So Kate’s career of surgery cannot be rightly understood as a means to the final end of choosing a career. A final end is such because a person *pursues* it for its own sake, regardless of why or how it was *chosen*.¹¹ Final ends are chosen for the sake of the maieutic end, but then pursued for their own sake once the maieutic end is satisfied. According to Schmitz, reasons for choosing an end may differ from reasons for pursuing that same end because “an act of adopting something as an end often changes our attitude toward it.”¹² We can adopt the desirable “set of attitudes that goes with pursuing a particular career in a wholehearted way” only by choosing some particular career.¹³ So although “final ends are pursued for their own sake,” that does not preclude the possibility that “further purposes [might be] served by the process of coming to have final ends.”¹⁴

For Schmitz, the fact that maieutic ends concern the choice rather than the pursuit of final ends implies that the relationship of final ends to maieutic ends differs substantially from that of instrumental and constitutive means to final ends.¹⁵ With instrumental means to ends, Schmitz notes that “the rationale for [the] pursuit [of the means] depends on its ongoing relation as a means to the further end.”¹⁶ So a person who diligently eats greatly disliked vegetables to promote cardiovascular health will change his diet if he discovers an untreatable brain tumor sure

⁵ Throughout his paper, Schmitz refers to instrumental and constitutive means to ends as “instrumental ends” and “constitutive ends.” This usage is strange—and needlessly confusing. So I will speak of “instrumental means” and “constitutive means”—or merely of “means” to refer to both kinds. I will refer to maieutic ends as such.

⁶ Schmitz, “Choosing Ends,” 239.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 240.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 241.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 241-2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 242.

to kill him in a few months. The end is no longer in play, so he abandons the means. In contrast to such instrumental means, final ends endure long past the satisfaction and elimination of the maieutic end. The adoption of the final end actually “eliminat[es] the earlier [maieutic] goal as an item to pursue.”¹⁷ So once a career is chosen, a person no longer has the goal of choosing a career: he simply values the career as a final end. According to Schmitz, these differences show that the relationship from maieutic ends to final ends is distinct from that of final ends to instrumental means.

Similarly, Schmitz argues that the generation of final ends from maieutic ends cannot be understood in terms of final ends and constitutive means. With constitutive means, the act of choosing some appropriate constitutive means to the final end is “a necessary preface to achieving the end”—but not its entirety.¹⁸ So choosing to bicycle today does not satisfy the end of exercising today: a person must actually ride his bicycle. In contrast, maieutic ends are fully satisfied just by “settling on a specific end,” e.g. simply by choosing to bicycle. So with constitutive means, a person “pursue[s] [constitutive means] A as a way of pursuing [final] goal B” whereas with maieutic ends, he “chooses [final] goal A as a way of achieving [maieutic] goal B.”¹⁹ Once again, the critical difference is that maieutic ends are satisfied by choice alone whereas final ends must be pursued.

In light of these differences, Schmitz regards maieutic ends as a distinct addition to the standard instrumentalist model of practical rationality. Moreover, such maieutic ends are not “merely a theoretical postulate.”²⁰ People experience genuine “drives to settle on a particular career or a particular [spouse].”²¹ Not all final ends are necessarily chosen via maieutic ends: “some people [may be] simply gripped by particular final ends.”²² Still, maieutic ends promise to explain “how an end, pursued as a genuinely final end, could nevertheless have been rationally chosen.”²³ Before considering whether maieutic ends can serve that critical function, we must pause to consider whether maieutic ends are genuinely distinct from instrumental and constitutive means to final ends at greater depth. To do that, we must first examine Schmitz’s concept of a “final end” in greater detail.

Schmitz’s Not-Really-Final Ends

Early in his paper, Schmitz defines a final end as any goal desired “as an end in itself.”²⁴ So a two-mile run is a final end—if a person “want[s] to run two miles just for the sake of being out there running.”²⁵ Similarly, a person can value a career, a spouse, and a college major as final ends.²⁶ Schmitz draws no bright line between final ends and constitutive and instrumental means. Rather, the three categories overlap: they are “not mutually exclusive.”²⁷ So the egg sandwich that I ate for breakfast this morning was a constitutive means to the end of breakfast and an instrumental means of alleviating hunger. It was also a final end in Schmitz’s sense: I

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 241.

¹⁹ Ibid., 242.

²⁰ Ibid., 244.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 238.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 244.

²⁷ Ibid., 238.

enjoyed its gooey delicious taste tremendously, but not for any further purpose. In essence, Schmitz classifies any activity enjoyed in whole or in part for its own sake as a final end.²⁸ On that view, a person's life is a veritable plenum of distinct final ends.

As we shall see, the plausibility and utility of Schmitz's concept of maieutic ends depends on this expansive understanding of final ends. If the term "final end" is restricted to its proper scope (or, if you prefer, the scope of concern to instrumentalism), the phenomena described by maieutic ends can be perfectly well understood in terms of instrumental and constitutive means to one genuinely final end. Yet maieutic ends have no power to rationally justify that final end.

Schmitz's definition of a final end merely as a goal pursued for its own sake is inadequate in two ways—as a comparison with Aristotle's requirements for final ends makes clear. Aristotle identifies two distinct criteria for the "chief good" (a.k.a. the final end) of human life in Book 1, Chapter 7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁹ First, that chief good must be "complete" in the sense of desirable solely for its own sake, not also for the sake of anything else.³⁰ Schmitz's final ends do not fully meet this criterion: they are desired for their own sake but also likely as means to some further end. So his final ends are not truly final at all: they are not terminal points in a chain of means and ends. Aristotle's second criterion is that of "self-sufficiency": the chief good will be "that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing."³¹ Schmitz's definition of a final end omits this requirement entirely: taken alone, a run, a career, or a spouse are not all that is good in life. So to the extent that such activities are enjoyed for their own sake, they are properly understood as constitutive means to the chief good, not as genuinely final ends.

In short, since the ends described by Schmitz as final ends are actually instrumental and constitutive means to further ends, they cannot also be final ends. Contrary to Schmitz's assertion of non-exclusivity, to clearly differentiate mere ends from final ends, those categories are—or should be—exclusive. The objection at hand is not merely a minor difference of terminology. Schmitz is muddying the philosophic waters by his expansive concept of "final end." After all, the instrumentalist model of practical rationality is perfectly capable of rationally justifying Schmitz's final ends based on the further ends served by them. Only final ends in the Aristotelian sense are outside the province of rational justification on that instrumentalist model. So the critical question—to be considered later—is whether maieutic ends can rationally justify those genuine final ends.

Given that Schmitz's final ends do not satisfy Aristotle's strict standards, we should ask: What are Schmitz's criteria for final ends? What is it that maieutic ends are supposed generate? Absent some definite standards, his final ends cannot be assumed to be outside the province of rational justification on the instrumentalist model. Yet Schmitz offers no explicit criteria: he is not concerned to explain why some activities are pursued as ends in themselves but simply observes that some might be.³² Notably, his final ends are not mere freewheeling Humean desires. They are stable ends with distinct qualities, not just random impulses of the moment.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Johnathan Barnes, trans. W.D. Ross, revised by J.O. Urmson, 2 vols., vol. 2, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1094a22.

³⁰ Ibid., 1097a25-35.

³¹ Ibid., 1097a15-19.

³² Schmitz, "Choosing Ends," 237.

The most plausible common feature of all Schmidtz's examples of final ends—a run, a college major, a career, a marriage—is some significant enjoyment or pleasure experienced in the dedicated pursuit of that activity. The problem with that interpretation, however, is that Schmidtz does not identify just the pleasure or the pleasurable elements of a run, a marriage, or a career as ends in themselves. The whole activity is described as a final end, even though perhaps partly constituted by significant pains. So firing and laying off employees would be a necessary (and foreseeable) element of a career in business management, just as a painful stitch or arduous hill might be a necessary element of a run. In such cases, it's inapt to describe the whole activity as pursued for its own sake, as Schmidtz does. Only the pleasure or enjoyment is pursued for its own sake, meaning that the run, the marriage, and the career aren't really final ends at all based on a criterion of pleasure or enjoyment.

Alternatively, Schmidtz's final ends might be deemed such because they assume something of a life of their own in a person's hierarchy of means and ends. A marriage and a career are the major ends to which all other activities in life are related, whether directly or indirectly. So even activities that are neither instrumental nor constitutive means to those ends must take account of them, e.g. by asking, "Will joining this basketball league interfere with my work and my marriage?" More importantly, once settling on such ends, a person only rarely considers the further ends they serve—meaning that they are effectively treated as Aristotelian final ends in day-to-day practical reasoning. However, Schmidtz clearly means something stronger than that. He classifies these ends as final ends, not merely as functionally similar to final ends in ordinary deliberation. Schmidtz also does not limit his final to major ends in life, as his example of running as a final end demonstrates. Even the choice of a college major has little impact on a person's life as a whole. So Schmidtz's final ends are not designated as such for their quasi-independent role in practical reasoning.

In sum, Schmidtz's notion of a "final end" is unclear, if not seriously muddled. It departs significantly from the standard Aristotelian understanding thereof. It's not a Humean desire. It's not a pleasure, nor a major end. Schmidtz's failure to clearly identify the basic nature of final ends raises serious questions about his case for maieutic ends. If Schmidtz's final ends are actually relative ends, then the attempt to explain their generation via maieutic ends is misplaced.

Maieutic Ends Are Nothing New

As we've seen, Schmidtz's case for augmenting the standard instrumentalist model of practical rationality with maieutic ends largely depends on the claim that the selection of (supposed) final ends like a spouse or a career can't be explained in terms of that standard model. While initially plausible, that claim depends on Schmidtz's confused notion of final ends. By speaking of a career or a spouse as "final ends," Schmidtz implies from the outset that they cannot be (adequately) justified as instrumental or constitutive means to some further end—and then maieutic ends promise to save the day. In fact, Schmidtz's supposed final ends are fully explained and justified by reference to further ends, mostly easily by the genuinely final end of Aristotelian flourishing. Once seen in that light, the maieutic ends that give birth to Schmidtz's supposed final ends can be understood as nothing more than ordinary constitutive and instrumental means to some further end. The new concept of "maieutic end" thus serves no distinct purpose: it adds nothing new to the standard instrumentalist model. To make this line of objection clear, we shall consider the particular case of choosing and pursuing a career.

While Aristotle was no great fan of the working life, the major contribution of a career to a flourishing life in a free society is not difficult to fathom. Most obviously, a career is an

instrumental means to the final end of human flourishing: productive work enables a person to obtain the goods required for life. Even the meager paycheck of a teenage store clerk can purchase food, shelter, and clothing, not to mention simple pleasures like movie tickets, ice cream, and books. Such goods contribute to a modestly flourishing life. As the long-term pursuit of some particular skilled work valued in the market, a career offers a person much more. It allows a person to accumulate the knowledge, skills, and experience to render his working hours far more productive than those of the teenage clerk. That commands a higher salary or greater income—and so allows the person to secure a greater quantity and/or higher quality of the goods important to a flourishing life, e.g. healthier foods, air conditioning, heart surgery, symphony tickets, gym memberships, etc. Such goods undoubtedly help a person live—and live well. By securing them, a career serves as a clear-cut instrumental means to a flourishing human life.

The instrumental value of a career is not limited to its capacity to generate a paycheck. A career is also an opportunity to cultivate and/or entrench moral and intellectual virtues like creativity, perseverance, foresight, justice, integrity, and courage. So a young person might experience the painful consequences of ignoring his problems at work before making the same mistakes in his marriage. In short, the choices that a person makes in his work can profoundly influence his character and thinking—and thereby influence other aspects of his life. A person can also develop significant friendships through his career that contribute to his flourishing.

Moreover, the career itself can be a constitutive means to flourishing—if well-chosen. The pursuit of a career occupies a substantial portion of a person's waking hours for most of his life. So the person enthused, animated, and inspired by the challenge of his work is flourishing through that career. Not every moment will be full of ecstatic joy, but the well-chosen career will offer ample opportunity for feelings of self-confidence, efficacy, satisfaction, pride, and the like. Such feelings are all psychological constituents of a flourishing life. So while a passion for one's work is not all that is required for a flourishing life, it can be a significant (if not the dominant) component.

As that sketchy analysis shows, a career is a significant instrumental and constitutive means to a flourishing life. That conclusion is confirmed by the simple fact that people do routinely abandon their chosen careers when no longer engaging, when too stressful, when unprofitable, and so on. In such cases, the chosen career is abandoned precisely due to its failure to properly serve the final end of a flourishing life. The same type of analysis would show that a marriage and a college major, Schmitz's other examples of significant final ends, are actually instrumental and constitutive means to flourishing—and so are rationally justified on that basis.

Given his view that a final end can also be an instrumental and/or constitutive means, Schmitz might well grant the above analysis of a career as a means while still asserting it to be a final end. It is certainly a relative end, but what reason do we have to think it a final end? A person's career is certainly a central goal in his life, the pursuit of which is enjoyable in and of itself. However, those facts are completely consistent with its being a significant instrumental and constitutive means to flourishing. The claim that a career is also a final end adds nothing new to that analysis—or rather, only muddles it. When understood as a crucial means to the end of human flourishing, the goal of a career is rationally justified by its relationship to flourishing. It is not an arbitrary goal by any stretch of the imagination, as are genuine final ends in instrumentalism. So the explanation of the choice of some particular career does not require any new concept of a “maieutic end”—since it can be understood as means to flourishing. How so?

For the reasons outlined above, a career is an instrumental and constitutive means to the final end of flourishing. However, a person cannot simply have “a career.” Or rather, to pursue some career means to pursue some particular career like surgery or teaching or appliance repair. That particular career is a constitutive means to the end of a career. Since particular careers are not doled out at birth, the pursuit of some particular career requires a person to first choose that particular career from the range of available options. That choice is an instrumental means to the end of a career: it is one step in the process of pursuing a career.³³ It is not even a particularly early step, since learning to walk, to read and write, to dress oneself, to eat with silverware, to treat others with respect, and so on are all necessary means to the end of productive work. Obviously, most people do not choose a career on a moment’s notice: that would be contrary to the final end of flourishing. Rather, a person must engage in a process, often over the course of months or years, of deciding the right career. That process, including the final choice of a career, is an instrumental means to the end of choosing the right career.

Although perhaps more complicated to explicitly detail than to practice, the crucial point is that the choice of some particular career, some particular spouse, or some particular college major can be perfectly understood in terms of constitutive and instrumental means to a genuine final end like flourishing. The introduction of the “maieutic end” to designate the goal of choosing some particular career, spouse, or major is unnecessary.

Maieutic Ends and Eudaimonia

The fact that Schmidtz’s concept of a “maieutic end” is not required to explain his examples of not-really-final ends is not reason enough to reject it completely. It might still serve a useful function in the justification of genuine final ends like human flourishing. That’s precisely what Schmidtz seemed to promise at the outset of his article: maieutic ends were supposed to make “possible... a chain of means and ends whose final link is rationally justified.”³⁴ So setting aside the problems with Schmidtz’s too-loose concept of final ends, can maieutic ends provide rational grounds for adopting some particular final end(s)?

Although reasonable, this line of inquiry misunderstands Schmidtz’s purpose in “Choosing Ends.” He does not attempt to rationally justify any genuinely final ends by reference to objective facts. Instead, he grants the supposedly unchosen final end of survival presumptive normative authority, infers from that the maieutic end of “having things to live for,” and thereby transforms the final end of survival into instrumental means to the particular ends generated by that maieutic end.³⁵ So the “loose ends” in the means-ends hierarchy are tied up but not justified.

Schmidtz begins his inquiry into the role of maieutic ends in the grand scheme of human life as follows:

Although some of our ends are chosen, some are not. The goal of survival, for example, is typically a goal with which we simply find ourselves. To give another example, we want to be good at what we do, and this goal also seems to be unchosen, something we simply have. We want to be competent. We do not need reasons to choose our unchosen ends, since we do not choose them. We simply have them. At the same time, even unchosen ends can be rejected, but to rationally reject them, one needs a reason to reject them. Unchosen final ends, therefore, have a

³³ Notably, the choice of some particular career is a means to the general end of “a career,” not to the end of the particular career chosen since that particular career doesn’t exist as an end until chosen.

³⁴ Schmidtz, “Choosing Ends,” 237.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 245-7.

certain normative inertia, which means they can serve as part of a relatively stable frame of reference in terms of which we can evaluate the ends we might acquire by choice.³⁶

This argument contains two basic claims, one descriptive and one normative. The first claim is that some ends are not chosen but rather somehow given. The second claim is that such unchosen ends have presumptive normative force—and rightly so. Both claims are dubious, although the second is of greater importance.

First, some human ends are clearly unchosen, most notably automatic biological functions like cell repair, digestion and blood flow. However, of the ends over which we can exercise control, it's hardly self-evident that those "with which we simply find ourselves" are unchosen, as Schmidtz claims. An end might not need to be consciously adopted to be chosen—not if it might be accepted implicitly. For example, I didn't consciously decide to eat some breakfast this morning before considering what to eat for breakfast this morning. Yet that doesn't make breakfast an unchosen end. Instead, it was presumed (since I usually eat breakfast) and then affirmed (since I chose to eat an egg sandwich). My end of breakfast might be described as "implicit" or "automatized"—but not "unchosen."

The end of survival is an even more clear-cut case of such an implicit end. To remain alive, person must consistently hold his own survival as a significant end, if not his chief goal. He cannot regard buying a quart of milk, finishing his dissertation, or pleasing his wife as of greater importance than his own life—or rather, if he does, he will be dead in fairly short order. So the end of survival is presumed in every activity. It is also affirmed every time a person takes some action required for survival, such as eating, drinking, visiting the doctor, looking both ways before crossing the street, and so on. Moreover, every competent adult is well aware of the fact that he need not continue living. So to speak of survival as an "unchosen end" merely because people rarely say to themselves, "Okay, I want to live," ignores the myriad ways we do implicitly choose to live in every hour of every day. However, even if we grant Schmidtz this first point, he's still facing an uphill battle on the matter of "normative inertia."

Second, Schmidtz claims that his unchosen ends are properly presumed to be legitimate: they have "normative inertia." That might be right—but only as a description of how people actually treat their given ends. Yet Schmidtz claims much more, namely that such ends ought to be granted presumptive (but not final) authority since "we need a fairly stable frame of reference to get started in assessing prospective ends."³⁷ Yet that presumption of moral authority is dangerous, particularly in the absence of any account of the origin of these unchosen ends. After all, what if our unchosen ends were implanted in us by our racist parents, our malicious siblings, or our deeply sexist culture? What if the pursuit of the unchosen human end of survival comes at the price of the destruction of some far higher value like pristine nature or causes the deaths of millions of innocent people? The mere fact that a person seems to find himself with some end is not grounds for supposing it moral or rational. In fact, such seemingly unchosen ends probably ought to be regarded with greater suspicion precisely because they were adopted without any rational scrutiny.

Of course, Schmidtz does advocate rejecting any unchosen ends found to be vicious. Yet he still wishes to grant them a kind of benefit of the doubt: since we already have these ends, we need *reasons to reject* them, not *reasons to choose* them. However, that semantic quibbling ignores a third possibility: we might need *reasons to retain* these ends—precisely because unchosen ends might be immoral, unfriendly, imprudent, inapt, etc. If we were only obliged to

³⁶ Ibid., 245.

³⁷ Ibid.

reject such ends when faced with a positive reason to do so, as Schmitz claims, then even the most vicious ends could be retained without moral fault—so long as the person refused to entertain any possible reasons to reject them. Thus Schmitz’s case for granting presumptive authority to unchosen ends is unpersuasive.

Next, Schmitz appeals to the moral inertia that he’s granted to unchosen ends (particularly survival) to generate a single ultimate maieutic end.³⁸ He writes:

A maieutic end is an end of bringing ends into existence, of giving oneself ends to pursue. To have ends to pursue is to have something to live for. If we have a single overarching and perhaps unchosen maieutic end, I would say it is the end of having things to live for. The various maieutic ends (settling on a major subject in college and then a career, defining ideals, choosing a spouse, finding ways of contributing to the community, and so on) are all species of the generic and overarching maieutic end of having things to live for, ends to which one can devote oneself. In different words, the end of having something to live for is the end of acquiring ends in general, the end of having one’s life be spent on something rather than nothing.³⁹

This maieutic end of finding something to live for is necessary, Schmitz argues, because “when day-to-day survival becomes too easy to keep us busy, that is when we need something else to aim at, lest we find ourselves with plenty of time to ponder the fact that there is nothing for the sake of which we are surviving.”⁴⁰ In other words, once mere survival may be easily secured, we must find activities to occupy and engage us. If we fail to do that, we might fall into hopeless despair and mind-numbing boredom at the futility of life. If that happens, we might commit suicide. Presumably, that would be a problem because we’re supposed to grant the unchosen end of survival presumptive authority.

Even apart from the objections to the premises discussed above, Schmitz’s reasoning is unpersuasive. If a life of bare survival is really not a life worth living, that would seem to be an adequate reason to override the unchosen end of life and embrace death. It’s not obviously a reason to find something more exciting to make life worth living via the overarching maieutic end instead. In fact, that might seem like an awful lot of work to secure the mere illusion of meaning in life.

Finally, Schmitz tidies up the “loose ends” in his chain of means and ends via his overarching maieutic end of “finding things to live for.” That maieutic end transforms the final end of “bare survival” into “a form of survival that has instrumental value as well,” in the sense that we must be alive to pursue the particular projects that make life worth living.⁴¹ As a result, “we change survival from something we happen to seek as a matter of descriptive biological fact into something with normative weight—a goal we have reason to seek.”⁴² In so doing, Schmitz claims, “we redeem survival as a goal.”⁴³ Whatever that means, it’s not justification. Schmitz hasn’t justified either the final end of survival or the maieutic end of finding things to live by reference to objective fact—meaning that the whole edifice of means and ends in a person’s life remains unjustified. Yet that’s what Schmitz promised to do: he was to show “a chain of means and ends whose final link is rationally justified.”⁴⁴ That’s obviously what instrumentalism demands, lest all our goals and actions in life be deemed arbitrary.

³⁸ Ibid., 247.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 237.

Further Worries

The reviews of Schmidtz's book *Rational Choice and Moral Agency*, of which the article "Choosing Ends" is a chapter, largely focused on the question of whether maieutic ends could provide a foundation for morality. For example, in *The Philosophical Review*, David Copp was worried by Schmidtz's concession that "a mafia assassin could be reflectively rational since his career might give his life meaning."⁴⁵ In *Ethics*, David Farrell doubted that "the commitments and concerns that are characteristic of the moral point of view" could be "appropriate candidates for the end of finding something to live for."⁴⁶ The most robust criticism was that of Gerald Gaus: he argued that Schmidtz's model of choosing ends based on their capacity to give life meaning is not only descriptively inaccurate since "some of us seldom if ever choose any end in order to give life meaning" but also normatively inadequate since the fact that "being a Catholic (or a socialist or an environmentalist) gives meaning to your life is a bad reason for being a Catholic, a socialist, or an environmentalist."⁴⁷

While these criticisms have some merit, they miss the more fundamental problems with Schmidtz's appeal to "maieutic ends" discussed in this paper. As we've seen, the problem with maieutic ends is not merely that they cannot generate a robust moral system. The problem is that they are based on a muddled understanding of final ends, that they are not distinct from constitutive and instrumental means, and that they cannot actually justify any genuine final ends. Given those problems, it's hardly surprising that maieutic ends fail to do as promised for morality.

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