

ABSTRACT OF COMMENTS

Baier on the Link Between Immorality and Irrationality

KAI NIELSEN

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

and

THE HASTINGS CENTER

Kurt Baier maintains that a group of people subscribing to rational egoism would not only want a sound system of coordinative guidelines taught as something for others to follow but not themselves, except where following them also coincides with the principle of self-anchored egoism, but that they also would want them taught in such a way that they would be socialized into reasoning and acting in accordance with them even when so reasoning and acting would not for them be justified in terms of the principle of self-anchored egoism. Even an individual member of such a group would will to be so socialized if he were to act rationally. He would accept, according to Baier, as his supreme principle of practical reason what he, at least, believed to be a sound system of coordinative guidelines and would thus be led to abandon his rational egoism. He would so act even in individual situations where so acting did not serve his own interests. He would strive to be not just a man of good morals, but also to be a morally good man.

Baier, I shall argue, has not shown anything that strong. A rational individual could without error reason as follows: I, for roughly the reasons that Baier gives, want a sound system of coordinative guidelines to be firmly entrenched in my society. This requires a certain socialization of the people in the society and I cannot in reason desire that such socialization be withheld from me, for nobody is going to accept such an exemption, and, even if they did, I do not want to see the practice started, for that would hardly be in my interest. But I still rationally can and do wish that such socialization not be successful in my own case. I wish, speaking for myself alone, that socialization to stick to the extent that I am able successfully to simulate acting on sound coordinative guidelines, to have the ability actually to act on them when it is my interest to do so and clairvoyantly to recognize

situations in which this is so and situations in which this is not so. I indeed recognize the value of the existence of social arrangements in which everyone, including me, is taught to adhere to these coordinative guidelines, but I hope that such teaching will not be successful in my case, because what I want to be able to do, in every case where I prudently can, is to give my interests pride of place and to do what I have the best reason to believe, everything considered, furthers my own interests. I will always take the interests of others to be subordinate to what I have the best reasons for believing will further my own interest.

Such a person is an immoralist, but Baier has not established that such an immoralist in so acting is acting irrationally or even less rationally than a person of sound moral principle. What he has at most shown is that such an immoralist would want a sound system of moral guidelines in place in society and would recognize the value of devices in the society which successfully socialize everyone into that morality. But Baier has not shown that reason requires that such a person desire that such socialization stick in his own case beyond giving him the ability successfully to simulate acting on principle, and to act, if he so chooses, to counteract the effects of such socialization where it plausibly threatens to become catching. And he has not shown that such a person must be less rational than reasonable persons of sound moral principle. Baier may have established that it is rational to have a sound system of moral practices and irrational not to have one, but he has not shown that a person who acts immorally necessarily acts irrationally. He has not shown that immoral behavior must be contrary to reason. We still have the problem of Hume's sensible knave.