



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Intuition and Construction: The Foundation of Normative Theory by
T. K. Seung

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The experiments yielded interesting results; two are worth noting. First, although the theoretical literature on repeated PDs has focused heavily on trigger strategies, subjects rarely use them. Indeed, subjects resisted using collective punishment strategies of *any* kind. Instead, they almost invariably tried to impose *selective* punishments—even when the identity of defectors was unknown! (In this circumstance the subjects verbally abused the unknown cheater. Clearly this is an effective punishment only if the cheater has internalized the relevant norms.) Second, although in the aggregate behavior was sometimes close to the Nash prediction, individual behavior was rarely Nash. These results probably constitute a good example of the effects of averaging idiosyncratic error. Errors there certainly were, for calculating the optimum strategy was difficult in most of the experiments, and the authors do not shy away from concluding that bounded rationality mattered.

Compared to the experimental findings, several of the conclusions from the field studies lacked punch. It is hardly surprising that successful handling of CPRs is more likely when there is monitoring and enforcement of rules regarding, for example, access to the commons (p. 315–316). A more subtle problem attends findings such as the endogenous creation of rules and institutions, which the authors emphasize repeatedly. From the perspective of conventional political science, this is not surprising: after all, we spend a great deal of time studying how laws (rules) and political institutions are created and maintained. It may surprise experimentalists, who are accustomed to running tightly controlled experiments in which subjects, precluded from changing the rules of the game, are forced to play the PD in its starkest form.

Perhaps the experimental findings were more interesting because the lab studies were aimed at a clear target—the relatively falsifiable hypotheses of games theory—whereas the field research was mostly guided by the less testable IAD framework. Indeed, the tie to game theory in the field study chapters was often slender. The formal analysis that was used was restricted to oneshot games, though the phenomena clearly involved repeated interactions.

Probably because the field data were less powerful than the experimental results, the authors could more easily maintain strong beliefs in hypotheses about macro phenomena—how real institutions manage CPRs—than about micro phenomena—how individuals behave in the lab. One of their most important propositions, maintained throughout the field studies, is essentially that local governance is good, central governance is bad. They do adduce evidence to support the claim, and their theoretical argument for local governance—institutions close to the problem are more likely to have information required for effective control of CPRs and to adapt to changes in those problems—is plausible enough.

But the assertion is too sweeping. There is virtually no theoretical analysis of the disadvantages of local governance or the benefits of central governance; it is as if the former can do little wrong and the latter little right. Nor is there consideration of how central institutions might work in concert with local ones—although this possibility has been explored in the literature on institutions and the repeated PD (e.g., Milgrom, North, and Weingast's work on the institution of the "law merchant" in medieval Europe). And empirically, they provide data (largely ignored) that contradicts the sweep of their own

claims. For example, in several of the Indian villages studied in chapter 12, the locally dominant Brahmans run the commons for their benefit and exploit the lower castes. And this is not an arcane issue in political science: it is not unusual for local elites to exploit people of lower status, and the latter sometimes find an ally in the central government. A second example: in the California water case it is casually noted that "California pumpers have access . . . to very good technical information provided by overlapping state and national agencies" (p. 308). Though most of the book pays careful attention to informational problems in CPRs, the significance of centralized informational assistance is overlooked in the California study.

In general, however, the authors are admirably receptive to disconfirming evidence. In particular, they freely acknowledge that several game theoretic predictions are confounded by experimental results, and they do not introduce ad hoc modifications in order to "save the theory." Thus the book is a fine counterexample to the claims of Green and Shapiro in their recent critique of rational choice theory.

We will and should see more collaborative efforts of this kind. There will be both a push and a pull for this trend. The pull is that the triangulation afforded by combining field research and experimentation, with both informed by theory, will be too tempting to forego. The push is that it will become increasingly difficult to become adept at all these methods. The solution is more successful collaboration of the kind produced by Ostrom, Gardner, Walker, and their colleagues.

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Intuition and Construction: The Foundation of Normative Theory. By T. K. Seung. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. 227p. \$27.50.

In his dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato argues for transcendental standards of knowledge—Ideas, or Forms—indirectly. Without invoking such standards, Socrates and his interlocutors run through a number of possible accounts of knowledge, all of which are seen to fail. Thus, the existence of Forms emerges from the unacceptable consequences of not having them. In *Intuition and Construction*, T. K. Seung argues along similar lines in order to demonstrate the existence of transcendental moral standards, which he also identifies as Platonic Forms.

Through seven of the book's nine chapters, Seung examines recent moral theories and the view of Kant. He is most interested in different forms of "constructivism," by which he means "the thesis that normative propositions and standards are constructed by human beings" (p. ix). Different versions of constructivism are attributed to a range of thinkers, including R. M. Hare, Alan Gewirth, Jürgen Habermas, and David Gauthier. Basically, Seung argues that these theorists violate their own constraints, illicitly introducing substantive propositions into their purportedly purely formal theories, in the former three cases, while Gauthier is unable to circumvent the "obvious extensional discrepancy" between his own view and traditional morality (p. 108). The "ideal" constructivism of John Rawls is carefully examined, with different strands of Rawls's theory sorted out. Though somewhat sympathetic to Rawls, Seung criticizes him

for taking his starting points from existing societies, thereby falling into nonnormative moral conventionalism. Then in attempting to avoid this situation, with his "Kantian constructivism," Rawls does not go far enough in recognizing transcendental norms.

After discussing additional thinkers, including Alisdair MacIntyre and Aristotle, Seung devotes a detailed and learned chapter to Kant. He contends that Kant abandoned the formal strictures of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in his later works, notably the *Critique of Judgment*, in which he invokes Platonic Ideas. While Seung's recounting of Kant will undoubtedly provoke controversy, his critical examinations of all thinkers are trenchant and highly interesting. His summaries are clear and compact and will benefit virtually all readers; the book can be recommended on this account alone. The discussion of constructivism is particularly rewarding, especially for students of Rawls, who will learn much about his moral method and how it relates to the views of other recent thinkers.

However, Seung's lengthy examination of these thinkers must be regarded as a prelude to his most original and provocative argument, that a revival of Platonic Forms can overcome the difficulties encountered by other scholars. Success here would obviously be a major contribution to ongoing debates. But the bulk of this side of Seung's project turns out to be more exposition, in this case of the metaphysics of Plato, who is said to have presented a defensible theory of Forms in his late works. Seung argues for a development of Plato's thought between the *Republic* and later works, notably the *Statesman* and *Laws*. He claims that Plato replaced the "skyscraper" account of Forms in the *Republic* with a less objectionable "bedrock" version. In the skyscraper model, the moral Forms provide fully developed moral standards, applicable to all conditions. In the bedrock version, Forms are indeterminate, providing only a normative foundation that must be filled in through application to particular circumstances, or construction. Thus, Seung's view is that Platonic Forms, known by rational intuition, must be appealed to in order to provide the secure base on which successful moral construction can proceed—hence the title of the work, *Intuition and Construction*.

In addition to the authority of Plato, Seung argues for his view by appeal to the consequences of forgoing Platonic moral standards, which are unacceptable: "Without transcendental norms, we would be imprisoned in normative positivism and cultural relativism" (p. 215).

Not surprisingly, I do not believe Seung's project ultimately succeeds. First, Seung's heavy reliance on an admittedly "highly unconventional reading" of Plato (p. xiv) is disconcerting, especially because he does not defend it in detail. For example, there is strong evidence for the reappearance, in book 12 of the *Laws*, of Forms akin to those described in the *Republic*. The implications of the language in this portion of the *Laws* are forcefully argued by Harold Cherniss (in the 1953 issue of *Gnomon*), among other scholars. Another problem is that Plato's Forms are components of an entire worldview, bound up with the immortality of the soul, the doctrine of recollection, and other familiar Platonic views. How the Forms can be extracted from this theoretical edifice is a problem Seung does not address. Accordingly, even if the authority of Plato did have immediate cachet in contemporary moral philosophy, the fact that Seung ignores both difficulties with, and evidence against, his interpretation of Plato obviously weakens his case.

Second and more important. Seung's main substantive argument is also undeveloped. The consequences of not accepting his transcendental standards receive short shrift. It is not clear that a moral method based on coherence (or reflective equilibrium, popularized by Rawls) cannot avoid the chaos Seung foresees. By working from our most secure convictions and the moral principles in which we have most faith, shaping this material into a coherent structure, one could develop a perspective from which to criticize objectionable aspects of our own culture, as well as other cultures. This possibility, widely supported in the philosophical community but ignored by Seung, poses nonmetaphysical counterpart to his ascent to Platonic heaven.

Third and last is a question of proportion. In Seung's critical chapters, thinker after thinker is skewered for resorting to unjustified assumptions. Then Seung argues from this accumulation of unsuccessful attempts to the need for his own position. But such an argument from elimination is unconvincing. In particular, it remains to be shown how the failure of these other thinkers justifies Seung's introduction of far more radical and controversial assumptions into his own position. Needless to say, the Platonic essences he posits must be carefully explained and defended in detail. Seung's failure to develop the positive side of his case properly is a significant shortcoming of a book that otherwise has much to recommend it.

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