Flourishing in a Risky World

WINTON BATES

ABSTRACT: The reviewer discusses how Kathleen Touchstone's book, *Freedom, Eudaemonia, and Risk*, raises the big question of why a person would rationally choose to risk their life, as well as prompting readers to think deeply about other issues including the natural rights of children, the point at which human life begins, the virtue of parenting, rules of thumb for charitable giving, and the bequest motive in risking death. He considers that Touchstone makes an important contribution in explaining the role that a person's concept of identity plays in principled risk-taking and by emphasizing that life is not riskless.

KEYWORDS: choose, risk, occupations, life, value, ethics, right, reproductivity, principles, identity

Freedom, Eudaemonia, and Risk: An Inquiry into the Ethics of Risk-Taking, by Kathleen Touchstone. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021. xi + 234 pp. (includes appendix, bibliography, and index)

The big question that Kathleen Touchstone raises at the outset and seeks to answer in this book is: Why would a person rationally choose to risk their life

if life is the ultimate value? As the book progresses toward an answer to that question, the author discusses a range of issues that are worth considering independently of their role in her subsequent consideration of the ethics of risk-taking. I focus here on some of her more innovative contributions.

The idea that children have rights is not new, but Touchstone argues that the positive right of children to childcare is a natural right, "the source of which is based on human nature—a human's rational faculty, specifically, its development" (Touchstone 2021, 20). The right of the child to care is inherent in the existence of the child as a human being (25). Parents are responsible for satisfying the positive right of the child to care, but not for creating that right.

That view makes sense to me. I accept that third parties should not turn a blind eye when children are abandoned or abused by their caregivers. However, the author has not persuaded me that the potential for that to occur is an important reason for the existence of government. It is not even clear that government intervention in childcare has produced superior outcomes for children than would otherwise have occurred as a consequence of actions by grandparents, other relatives, family friends, and charitable organizations.

Touchstone suggests that the natural right of children to care also applies to the unborn (30). She argues that if life is said to end with the cessation of specific brain wave activity, it could be regarded as beginning with the presence of the same brain wave activity (at about the eighth week of gestation). Perhaps there are good reasons to reject that line of argument, but they are not obvious to me. It deserves serious consideration in my view.

Ayn Rand's view of productive work to be man's purpose in life is used by the author as a launchpad for discussion of the nature of parenting. Rand regarded child-rearing as potentially productive, but optional. Touchstone argues that child-rearing is sufficiently different from productivity to be considered a separate category. Productivity is normally a prerequisite for the consumption that sustains a person's life. By contrast, parenting is nonremunerative and hence not life sustaining from the parent's perspective (42).

Touchstone suggests that although parenting is not necessary for survival, it satisfies a psychological need. In that respect, it is similar to productivity. A person satisfies a psychological need by being productive, even if he or she does not need to work to survive. The moral obligation for parenting is similar to the moral obligation for a person who receives an inheritance to be productive to maintain the value of that inheritance. Every living person is the beneficiary of reproductivity (including parenting). The author argues: "Based on this line of reasoning, it would follow that, like productivity, reproductivity would be a cardinal virtue" (87).

Touchstone generalizes her argument for reproductivity in making a case for charitable giving. She argues that most people receive benefits for which they have not paid, or not paid in full. Examples of such benefits include advances in basic knowledge, and inventions and other creative works for which only limited property rights exist. If giving is motivated by global reciprocity—giving back in exchange for such benefits—it is not self-sacrificial (92). To avoid sacrificial giving, she suggests the rule of thumb of sharing good fortune—actual income in excess of expected income (94).

Economists who are accustomed to think of people choosing between all alternative expenditures by ranking them on a single preference scale will point out that we cannot avoid opportunity costs by using rules of thumb that make them less obvious. Some sacrifice must still be involved in giving away windfall gains because we forgo the potential to use those gains for our own personal pleasure. Touchstone contends, however, that the preference scales we use for charitable giving are (or can be) separable from expenditures on oneself. She also argues that parents can use a separate preference scale for spending on children.

It does seem to be common for people to use budgeting rules of thumb to avoid comparing the satisfaction they obtain from giving a sum to charity, or from buying clothes for their children, with that potentially obtainable from luxury spending on themselves. Self-respect seems to require people to adopt a frame of mind in which they can readily limit consideration of opportunity costs associated with some of their choices. This seems to be implied in words that Ayn Rand had John Galt use:

> "If you wish to save the last of your dignity, do not call your best actions a 'sacrifice': that term brands you as immoral. If a mother buys food for her hungry child rather than a hat for herself, it is not a sacrifice: she values the child higher than the hat; but it is a sacrifice to the kind of mother whose higher value is the hat, who would prefer her child to starve and feeds him only from a sense of duty." (Rand [1957] 1999, 1029)

Could it be rational for a combat soldier to "go beyond the call of duty" to throw himself on a grenade to save his comrades? Touchstone (2021) suggests that the fact that lives are finite—death is inevitable—"may account for why some people might be willing to risk their lives and it might be rational for them to do so" (106). However, she adds: "That inevitability alone explains nothing" (107). She suggests that there is also a bequest motive involved. A person may be willing to risk their life to preserve a principle. Individual lives are finite, but principles can live on if they are preserved. For example, many people have been willing to risk their lives to preserve liberty.

As I was reading Touchstone's views on global reproductivity, charitable giving, and the bequest motive, the thought crossed my mind that many people would regard such considerations as integral to their own flourishing. They might perceive such behavior to be honorable and consistent with their desire to behave with integrity toward others. As Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen (2016) have explained: "Integrity expresses itself interpersonally in honor" (20).

In my view, Touchstone (2021) makes an important additional contribution by relating the bequest motive to the concept of personal identity:

> At the core of why a person would be willing to risk death is the concept of identity. A person's identity is how he thinks and how he acts. It comprises his values and his virtues. They are embodied within him. Virtues are actions that are undertaken in order to attain a value or values. Central to identity is consistency. A person may act on his principles even when he faces death because by acting consistently he is preserving his identity. (107)

This brings us to the question of why people choose risky occupations when pecuniary rewards do not fully compensate for the risks involved. The author views the choice of an occupation where risk is or can be persistently high as somewhat different from the choice to risk one's life by acting on one's principles. She suggests two reasons why people choose risky occupations such as firefighting. First, life is not riskless; risk is unavoidable. Second, risk can be lessened by deliberate practice in controlled environments designed to minimize or reduce dangers (193).

That explanation does not fully answer the question in my view. If training does not eliminate the additional risk associated with the occupation, and remuneration does not fully compensate for it, the fact that people choose to engage in the occupation suggests that they must receive nonpecuniary rewards of some kind. Different individuals are likely to be motivated by different nonpecuniary rewards, but people engaged in many professions have reasons to view them as honorable. For example, many firefighters could be expected to view protection of life and property as a particularly worthy endeavor. Perhaps they are willing to shrug off the additional risks involved because they perceive firefighting as more a vocation than an occupation.

This review has focused on issues that I have found particularly interesting. There is even one chapter that I found interesting that I have not attempted to cover. I refer to the chapter on probability, which seeks to define that concept to encompass several different approaches to measurement.

When I began reading *Freedom, Eudaemonia, and Risk*, I thought it would probably reinforce my neo-Aristotelean classical liberal views. It has done that, but it has also challenged me to sharpen up some of my thinking. I am

particularly impressed by Touchstone's willingness to attempt to shed light on controversial issues such as the point at which human life begins.

This wonderful book has potential to prompt readers to think more deeply about human rights, parenting, charitable giving, and risk-taking. It deserves to be widely read.

WINTON BATES is an Australian economist. Over the last thirty years, he has developed a strong interest in broad issues concerning human flourishing. Prior to that, his career focused on public policy relating to economic development, international trade, productivity growth, and technological progress.

REFERENCES

Den Uyl, Douglas J. and Douglas B. Rasmussen. 2016. *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Rand, Ayn. [1957] 1999. *Atlas Shrugged*. New York: Penguin.

Touchstone, Kathleen. 2021. *Freedom, Eudaemonia, and Risk: An Inquiry into the Ethics of Risk-Taking*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

The First Russian Biography of Ayn Rand

ANASTASIYA VASILIEVNA GRIGOROVSKAYA

ABSTRACT: This article reviews the first book in Russian to reflect on Rand's life and work in the context of her native land. It publishes some key documents from Rand's Russian past for the first time and presents one of the most important independent and objective analyses of Rand's legacy.

KEYWORDS: Ayn Rand, biography, Russia, cultural context, historical archives, Nathaniel Branden

Ayn Rand, by Ludmila L. Nikiforova and Mikhail B. Kizilov. Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, 2020. 333 pp.

Ayn Rand's name is associated in Russia only with the United States, despite the writer's obvious connection with her native land. Rand biographies that were published in the West have emphasized her life in the United States and