

The varieties of cleverness again: Rosamond and rational actor economics

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Abstract. This paper tries to distinguish *Middlemarch's* Rosamond from a rational actor economist.

Draft version: Version 3 (25th September 2024 - trying, dear Reader, to salvage this paper)

Who is Rosamond? Well, there are various Rosamonds. I am referring to Rosamond from George Eliot's long, esteemed, rewarding novel *Middlemarch*, though not quite top tier in some people's eyes (see Aldington 1914: 17). She appears to be counted amongst the clever people in the novel. I wish to look into that impression.

She marries Lydgate, thought of as one of the clever, and who can marry the clever but the clever?! Here is a character warning her against doing so:

Mr. Lydgate is very intellectual and clever; I know there is an attraction in that. I like talking to such men myself; and your uncle finds him very useful. But the profession is a poor one here. To be sure, this life is not everything; but it is seldom a medical man has true religious views – there is too much pride of intellect. And you are not fit to marry a poor man. (1871-2: Chapter 31)

Anyway, even if the clever can marry outside that group, Rosamond seems to be credited with cleverness herself by the novel's narrator:

What she liked to do was to her the right thing, and all her cleverness was directed to getting the means of doing it. (1871-2: chapter 58)

Why she is like a character from rational actor economics!

But there is at least one difference between Rosamond and rational actor economics, which I shall try to specify

(Rational actor economics) i. It does not assess the value of ends. ii. It assesses the means taken towards ends. Which means are the most rational given those ends?

(Rosamond) i. She does assess the value of ends – if she feels like pursuing a given end, then it is right. ii. All her cleverness is directed towards getting the means of pursuing her ends.

I am going to assume there is no difference between the second component in both. What about the first? Rational actor economics, as usually understood, is available to someone who thinks, “These are my ends, but I regard them as morally wrong.” It does not get involved in judgment of ends. But Rosamond does. Regarding the first component of Rosamond’s outlook, I presume “right” refers to the morally right. She holds that all the ends she feels like pursuing are morally right!

There is also a delightful implication by the narrator, when it is said that all her cleverness is directed towards the means. Her method of moral assessing ends is not clever, stupid even: “If I, Rosamond, feel like doing it, then it is right.”

References

Aldington, R. 1914. Violet Hunt. *The Egoist* 1 (1): 17-18.

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