

SHOULD CITIZENS OF A WELFARE STATE BE TRANSFORMED INTO “QUEENS”? A RESPONSE TO RISSE

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Mathias Risse has provided a thoughtful critique of my book, raising serious points about a major part of the argument. I am glad to have the opportunity to reflect further on it.

The book contends that policy should be designed both to reflect the fact that the people who provide public services such as education or health care are a combination of knaves (self-interested egoists) and knights (other-directed altruists), and to treat users of those services, not as passive victims of services (pawns), but instead as powerful consumers (queens). It discusses various ways in which this might be done including the use of quasi-markets in service delivery (where tax funds are used to equalize everyone's purchasing power for, say, education and health care, but provision is left to a competitive market), and more direct ways of empowering citizens, such as a demogrant (a universal grant of capital to everyone on attaining the age of majority).

Risse seems happy with the book's arguments concerning the essentially empirical propositions relating to knights and knaves, and indeed supports many of the policy ideas. He reserves his principal criticisms for the philosophical justifications that I put forward for my normative position that service users ought to be turned from pawns to queens.

In the book, I contend that the case for turning pawns to queens can be made from any of three perspectives: liberal, welfarist, and communitarian. Risse argues that from each of these perspectives the argument is “weaker than [Le Grand] thinks.” First, the liberals. Risse divides these into two – libertarians of a Nozickian kind and liberal egalitarians of a Rawlsian kind – and claims that neither would support my position. This is primarily because I set my arguments for transforming

service users from pawns into queens within the context of a universalist welfare state. That is, I assume that the service whose users are to be empowered – whose pawns are to be transformed into queens – is financed from some form of redistributive taxation, and that the purchasing power for the service concerned is equalized before the market or quasi-market is allowed to let rip. Risse argues a true libertarian would stop well before this, on the grounds that redistributive taxation has no place in any scheme really designed to promote people's freedom of action. In contrast, a liberal egalitarian would accept the need for redistributive taxation, but, in doing so, would acknowledge that the coercive element essential to such taxation must imply that people are being treated to some extent as pawns. Hence she too would not advocate pawns being turned completely into queens.

At a later stage in his review, Risse returns to this libertarian/liberal egalitarian divide, arguing that an American reader, likely to be more subject to libertarian intuitions, would find it odd that I push for the empowerment of users but do not question the redistributive welfare state, while a European one would find it peculiar that, while both she and I would accept the legitimacy of limiting (some) individuals' freedoms through redistribution, I can still argue for users to be queens. Risse says that "it is hard to have it both ways."

I would not presume to argue with a philosopher as to the way that different schools of thought might react to my arguments, and I accept the implied rebuke that my ascription of the label "liberal" to what are actually two very different positions was simplistic. But I will not accept that my own position is in some way inconsistent. For my argument simply represents a trade-off between different values, none of which has lexicographic priority over another. I am not a pure libertarian, in the sense that I consider policies designed to promote liberty or freedom of action always and in every context dominate other concerns such as equity or social justice. Redistributive taxation and the equalization of people's ability to obtain health care and education is thus perfectly acceptable – and indeed desirable. On the other hand, I am not a pure egalitarian (or, perhaps more accurately, equitarian) in the sense that I consider concerns of equity or social justice should always dominate every other consideration. So a complete curb on everyone's freedom of action in the name of equity is not acceptable. Since to achieve "full" equity and "complete" liberty simultaneously is probably impossible, the aim is to find a policy solution that achieves an acceptable measure of both equity and liberty, while accepting that neither objective is likely to be completely satisfied. And using the revenue from redistributive taxation to move towards greater equality of capital ownership (as with the demogrant), or to equalize purchasing power in health care and education (as with quasi-market systems of service delivery) seems to be an illustration of just such an acceptable balance.

Of course, the problem with that position for political philosophy is that it does not really explain why this balance is acceptable but another is not. Ideally there would be an even more fundamental principle that would determine the point of an acceptable trade-off between liberty and equity, but the search for such principle is well beyond my scope. However, I do have other reasons why I believe that policy proposals that incorporate the balance concerned are attractive. And this is where the welfare and what I call the communitarian arguments come in (Risse points out – correctly – that I only consider a welfarist interpretation of communitarianism). Essentially I argue that both the welfare of each individual, and the welfare of others in the wider community, will be better served by these policies than by alternative ways of providing services such as education and health care – especially those that give professionals control over the allocation of children to schools or patients to hospitals, effectively reducing the users of these services to pawns. This is not because I believe that the policies that turn pawns into queens do not have their problems with respect to individual and community welfare; indeed, I refer to several of these difficulties in the book. It is just that I consider them superior in these respects to the alternatives. Risse does not buy all my arguments, and I would accept some of his points (for instance, that we might place a greater faith in the professionals making decisions on behalf of users, if, as I advocate elsewhere in the book, we could successfully line up knightly and knavish incentives). But ultimately this is more of an empirical question than a philosophical one, and we probably need more evidence of the impact of different systems on welfare before we can arrive at a definitive assessment.

To take up one specific point in this context. Discussing the proposal that patients should have more control over their treatment, Risse argues that “when it comes to resource distribution, each patient has an interest in her health and thus is a poor judge of how to distribute resources also needed by others.” I agree with this in so far it refers to choice of treatment, and indeed use similar arguments elsewhere in the book to justify GP fund-holding: the system where family practitioners hold the budget for purchasing secondary care for their patients. But, so long as there is available capacity in the relevant hospitals, it does not apply to choice of hospital, once the diagnosis has been made and the appropriate treatment specified; for in those circumstances one person’s choice does not displace another’s. So the desirability of patient choice can depend on the type of decision being made; and again a trade-off between patient and professional power may be necessary in certain circumstances.

Finally, a specific point in a different context. Risse takes issue with my argument for state intervention in decisions concerning savings for old age. The argument is that state intervention to encourage savings is justified even in a world of queens, because there is a form of market failure here: that individuals have only a tenuous connection with their future selves

and hence impose external costs on those future selves by their current savings (or lack of savings) decisions. Risse's argument against this is that either it is rational for current individuals to neglect their future selves, in which case the state should similarly neglect them, or it is not rational, in which case the state would have no need to encourage savings over and above that which rational individuals are doing already. Here Risse is assuming that the state only has a responsibility to its current citizens. But I think it is reasonable to assume that it also has a responsibility to other people who suffer external costs as a by-product of the actions of those citizens, including those who live in other states, and, of more relevance to my argument, including those who live in the same state in the future. The correction of external costs has always been seen as a proper role for the state, and, in encouraging current individuals to save more and hence benefit future individuals, the state is legitimately exercising that role.