

12-2006

***Indeterminacy and Society* by Russell Hardin**

Daniel R. Sabia

University of South Carolina - Columbia, sabia@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/poli_facpub



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 4, Issue 4, 2006, pages 753-754.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=PPS>

© 2006 by Cambridge University Press

This Book Review is brought to you by the Political Science, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

and to the challenges they pose to the left liberalism she espouses. So, for instance, although she is well aware of many of the problems with the idea of “needs,” she rather gives the impression of resolving them without actually doing so. The claim that “the identification and interpretation of needs have a socially constructed aspect and also involve a personal ascription of these needs to oneself” (p. 98) is immediately followed by the assertion that we have a need for, among other things, art. But many people can and do live worthwhile lives without art. Why not, say, a need for religion, or the “spiritual,” which is lacking from her list? Or, to give another example: When she claims that a linguistically differentiated cultural minority has a “group right to provide the means for the perpetuation of that linguistic community” but not the right to “insist that all of its members [be] required to be educated only in that language” (p. 124), she simply passes over the hard question of whether the minority culture has a right to insist that all its members be educated in its language as a first language. Or, again, there is little real effort to address the problems posed for her conception of democracy by environmental problems that may have catastrophic consequences for future generations. Surprisingly, her response to the objection that future persons cannot participate in democratic decision making appears to be that we must “narrow the participation requirement to make it more manageable” (p. 226), not to find a better way of including the interests of future generations. Unfortunately, this tendency is at its most marked in the final chapter on terrorism in which some optimistic sentiments about human solidarity are combined with the largely uncomprehending parochialism with which so many Americans seem to view terrorism post 9/11.

Ultimately, although she is not unique in this, I worry that Gould’s political prescriptions float free of any viable conception of political agency. Some might say that this is merely an empirical matter, and not the province of political philosophy. But I am not complaining that she does not offer practical mechanisms for effecting change, only that we need to have some conception of how her theoretical prescriptions could be brought about in a way that both is consistent with her theory and has at least a modicum of empirical plausibility. For instance, given the way a globalized economy works, many of Gould’s proposals for economic democratization require near-universal simultaneous changes in the global market. But we have very little idea of what political agency could bring these about, and probably none at all of how they could be brought about democratically. In fairness, many readers will not be exercised by these concerns to the extent I am. And, as I said earlier, there is indeed much that is worthwhile in the detailed discussion and argumentation.

Indeterminacy and Society. By Russell Hardin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 192p. \$39.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

— Dan Sabia, *University of South Carolina*

Russell Hardin aims in this wide-ranging text to explain the sources of indeterminacy in social life, its implications for theory, and its consequences for practice. Indeterminacy marks circumstances in which individual and collective actors cannot determine the results or outcomes of their choices, not so much because of lack of power or causal ignorance (which might be remedied) but because the social world characteristically presents them with stochastic and strategic problems, and therefore forces on them stochastic and strategic choices. The two problems are distinct but often related. Stochastic problems arise whenever choice carries with it the possibility of harm; in many social and political contexts, the possibilities and the identities of those harmed may or may not be known, and these factors matter in ways Hardin discusses.

The author emphasizes strategic problems, however, in part because stochastic problems in contexts of collective choice often arise due to possible outcomes that are produced by strategic interactions. Here, individual choosers select strategies to advance their interests, and outcomes depend on what all involved in the interaction choose to do; but what all will choose to do is contingent and cannot usually be known, and so outcomes are unpredictable and strategies indeterminate. Supposing that iterated prisoner’s dilemma “is a good model of much of the life of exchange and cooperation” (p. 6), Hardin argues in Chapter 2 that in fixed number iterated play, rational strategies cannot be theoretically specified. Demanding, as some rational choice theorists do, that there be some determinate rational strategy (such as always-defect on the basis of the well-known backward-induction argument) “is not sensible, which means that there is no best strategy” (p. 21).

Hardin’s central thesis, that indeterminacy is unavoidable and pervasive for these reasons, is correct, and he contends that this is a truth too often ignored or denied. Although the contention is exaggerated, it is not without merit. Since indeterminacy is extensive, our desire for determinate social theories and for social and political mastery should be restrained, but this is a prescription often resisted. Hence, part of Hardin’s effort is spent criticizing those thinkers and schools of thought, in economics, law, and political, social, and moral theory, who have mistakenly developed or defended determinate responses to problems of indeterminacy. Included are game theorists and economists who suppose that choice theory is determinate (e.g., Harsanyi in game theory), theorists who assume that welfare can be cardinalized (e.g., Bentham’s utilitarianism), and theorists who assume that unconditional rules of conduct can be justified (e.g., Kant’s deontological ethics).

The author also discusses thinkers who have dealt with indeterminacy more or less successfully, either by adopting what he terms “pragmatic responses” and “tricks,” or “by making indeterminacy an assumption or conclusion of the analysis, as in Arrow’s theorem” (p. 6). Pragmatic responses are helpful, though limited and possibly misleading; making indeterminacy a fundamental assumption is not misleading but it is often limited. Hobbes’s solution to the problem of social order is exemplary. He justified the necessity of government, primarily, by adopting the principle of mutual advantage *ex ante*, a normative principle championed by Hardin throughout the text. The principle asserts that we should adopt a collective choice or policy when, *ex ante*, it serves the interests of each and all. Hobbes contended that social order, and therefore government, does precisely this. But while this is motivating insofar as we all do share an interest in order, we also have other divergent and conflicting interests, and these may well lead us to disagree about the sort of government we think best. This indeterminacy Hobbes avoids by adopting the “trick” of contending that “we know too little about the effectiveness of various forms of government to be very confident of the superiority (for our own interest) of any one form over any other” (p. 43). He invokes, in other words, the principle of insufficient reason in order to secure the conclusion that, given our indeterminate circumstances, we should accept government—any government.

The principles of mutual advantage and insufficient reason are often employed by Hardin to describe ways of dealing with problems of indeterminacy. Stochastic policy and institutional choices, for example, may serve shared interests, and sometimes, the risks they carry are known in the aggregate but are unknown at the individual level (e.g., vaccination policies, creating a criminal justice system). Then mutual advantage *ex ante* can be motivational and ignorance functional; when individuals know or suspect they will be harmed, institutional and policy proposals are likely to be opposed and may be stymied. On the other hand, many concrete policies are not obviously advantageous to all, and that knowledge may justify pragmatic responses, such as sanctioning the theoretically suspect move of making interpersonal comparisons of utility at the policy level, when doing so secures broad, mutually advantageous, institutional goals.

In the last of the eight chapters in his text, Hardin again observes that institutions, such as a criminal justice system, can often be justified *ex ante* “as mutually advantageous in our expectations (although the choice between alternative institutions [e.g., what kind of criminal justice system] may not be),” and that specific policies often cannot be justified in this manner (p. 125). This leads him to argue for a “two-stage theory” of government, in which institutions and broad policy goals come first, implementation and more concrete decisions second. He thinks this

means that those who administer institutions and implement policies that serve mutual advantage should be compelled to perform their roles and tasks, rather than be granted discretion to serve the larger purposes of the institution (pp. 126–27). More plausibly, it leads him to the related conclusion that if we accept what are always imperfect institutions on the grounds of mutual advantage, we must “to some extent” permit mutual advantage considerations to trump specific considerations of justice (e.g., as accepting a criminal justice system means knowingly allowing some miscarriages of justice) (p. 129). It also leads Hardin to again defend pragmatically accepting the making of interpersonal comparisons of welfare in some policy contexts.

Indeterminacy thus makes of Hardin a consequentialist in moral and social theory, where consequences are, in general, judged in terms of welfare construed ordinally, rather than cardinally. And it makes him a political institutionalist who believes that indeterminacy is often resolved “mechanically” or pragmatically, as opposed to theoretically. Institutions resolve our collective problems “mechanically” when the principle of mutual advantage leads us to select this or that specific institution, even though that principle is not likely to entail the specific choice made. And institutions may “even impose [determinate] theory on us,” as they do when they force us to accept injustice in a mutually advantageous institution like a criminal justice system, and when they force us to accept interpersonal comparisons of cardinal utility to implement institutional goals (p. 121).

Space considerations require ignoring in this review other arguments and themes canvassed in Hardin’s text, including his mostly appreciative discussion of Coase’s theorem in Chapter 5 and mostly critical assessment of John Rawls in Chapter 7. Overall, I found some of the arguments repetitive and not always well organized, and should note that much of what is on offer here has been presented by Hardin elsewhere, not just in various articles but in his earlier books, particularly *Collective Action* (1982) and *Morality Within the Limits of Reason* (1988). But like those earlier efforts, this text makes worthwhile and provocative contributions to rational choice theory in particular, and to social and political theory more generally.

The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global.

By Virginia Held. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 220p. \$45.

— Joan Cocks, *Mount Holyoke College*

In her latest book, Virginia Held elaborates on themes from previously published articles to explicate and defend the ethics of care. For those unfamiliar with this well-developed tendency of feminist thought, she reviews its evolution from the 1980s writings of Sara Ruddick, Carol Gilligan, and Nel Noddings to the more recent work of theorists including, among many others, Eva Kittay,