

The varieties of cleverness again: Rosamond and rational actor economics

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Abstract. Is Rosamond from *Middlemarch* one of the clever? Well, the description comes across as ironic today. We are encouraged to think of her in that way at points, but various features of the novel undermine the impression of cleverness.

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“Queen of all malodorousness

No one competes on that score

Your royal highness

For now and ever more.”

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)

Uncle and the clever: how things have changed since the nineteenth century, if I may advertise (Edward 2022)!

Anyway, she 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 assessment of ends is not clever,

stupid even: “If I, Rosamond, feel like doing it, then it is right.” (“You must learn to take my judgment on questions you don’t understand,” says Tertius Lydgate angrily. We can imagine a meta-ethical update in which she has some really clever defences of her moral philosophy and the novel’s implication is not made!)

Rosamond does not really achieve the ends she hoped for by marrying. The situation is roughly as predicted. All her cleverness is not enough to avoid that. That too undermines her ranking amongst the clever, even her very inclusion.

I shall end by quoting a description of Lydgate, painfully revising his assessment of his wife’s intellect:

His superior knowledge and mental force, instead of being, as he had imagined, a shrine to consult on all occasions, was simply set aside on every practical question. He had regarded Rosamond’s cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman. He was now beginning to find out what that cleverness was—what was the shape into which it had run as into a close network aloof and independent. No one quicker than Rosamond to see causes and effects which lay within the track of her own tastes and interests.... (1871-2: chapter 58)

References

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

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