

## Normative Deliberation and Ideals

Harry Brighouse

*University of Wisconsin–Madison*

Ron Aboodi's "Critical Thinking, Thin Ideals, and Irreducibly Normative Deliberation" presents a compelling argument, leaving me initially unsure how to respond to such an elegantly crafted and tightly argued paper.<sup>1</sup> I ignored the "read the paper first so you know there's something wrong with it" directive I was given as a youngster. So, I'm going briefly to summarize what I see as the central purpose of the paper and then ask a question.

Here is the problem: critical thinking is something we want children—and the adults they become—to engage in, not only when they are doing straight-forward means-ends reasoning, but when they are reflecting on the ends they have adopted and ought to adopt. In other words, we want them to engage in irreducibly normative deliberation, and not just at any moment, but consistently over time. The only way to make this likely—that they will engage in irreducibly normative deliberation persistently over time—is to instill a standing commitment to engage in that kind of critical thinking even when the extrinsic rewards that we typically use to prompt young people to engage in all sorts of desirable behavior (in this case, often the approval of parents, teachers, ministers, rabbis) are no longer available.

The question is: *what sort of standing commitment is suitable for this role?* Of course, another question Aboodi leaves on the table is how to instill such a commitment? He argues that an unrestricted self-standing ideal of critical thinking has the problem that it would motivate critical thinking even in cases in which critical thinking is inapt. This is the "one thought too many" problem: an unrestricted ideal leads agents to have "one thought too many" when their loved one and a stranger are both in danger—the one thought being "*Is it permissible for me to save my loved one instead of the stranger?*" Furthermore, the self-standing ideal would be insensitive to the relative urgency of particular decisions. Aboodi argues that it would not distinguish between the less urgent question of how property rights on the moon should be arranged from the more urgent question

of how to vote in a crucial and un-gerrymandered upcoming election. And any commitment to unrestricted self-standing ideal, he thinks, is dogmatic: it does not invite, and perhaps does not permit, reflection on the appropriateness of critical thinking.

What Aboodi thinks can do the work is what he calls a *thin ideal*. An ideal is thin if it carries little to no empirical information and is, notwithstanding that, normative. So “good” is thin, whereas “being courageous” is not. Aboodi argues that on those occasions on which we must weigh different and conflicting normative considerations to decide how we should act, our motivation cannot be a “thick” normative idea, like “minimizing suffering” or “being honest.” Instead, he suggests we should be guided by a “thin” ideal (one more abstract than those which it is attempting to weight against one another) like “doing what is right.” My question is whether inculcating a self-standing commitment is really as inadequate as he thinks.

A background comment: I am not convinced by the “one thought too many” thought. It certainly seems a bit odd to be thinking about who to save in the moment of having to make a split-second decision. But, sitting here now, not only is it not wrong with pondering whether it is legitimate to save my wife, but something seems wrong with not ever doing it. I’m not suggesting that it would be wrong to save one’s spouse or loved one, or even that it is not obligatory to do so. Rather, that is something that we need a moral theory to tell us, just as we need a moral theory to tell us that, and why, a particular killing is wrong. The “one thought too many” thought gets its appeal from the seeming wrongness of someone deliberating about this in the moment. But no sensible picture of moral agency sees agents doing that. Instead, moral agents train their characters to act aptly in the moment, but part of that training involves reflection on numerous possibilities.

Does a “self-standing ideal” require us to engage in normative deliberation in the moment of crisis? It might allow it (and, as I have indicated, that might be ok), but I don’t see why it *requires* it, any more than a “self-standing ideal” of appreciating beauty. When I am on the cricket field in a close catching position it is inapt to appreciate the beauty of the flighted, dipping ball knowing

that it might catch the edge of the bat and fly in my general direction. The close fielder learns, and learns quickly, when to and when not to appreciate beauty. Similarly with the ideal of irreducible normative deliberation: we might possess and endorse that self-standing ideal but, over the years, as experiences and reflections accumulate and as we reflect especially on our errors and modify our dispositions in response, become more nuanced and trained to respond aptly to the circumstances. And if that happens— and it might happen naturally, or something like naturally— then is there a need specifically to inculcate the ideal in a way that is sensitive to what is urgent? Or might that just *happen*?

---

## REFERENCES

1 Ron Aboodi, “Critical Thinking, Thin Ideals, and Irreducibly Normative Deliberation,” *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 4 (same issue), <https://doi.org/10.47925/80.4.017>.