

Commentary:

Narrow Bridge Games and their Rescue of Rational Constraints in Moral Contractualism

In his paper, *Narrow Bridge Games and Their Rescue of Rational Constraints*, Gabriel negates the constraint critique of contractualism by showing that it permits the usage of rational (non-moral) constraints in decision making. The reason why this is an issue at hand, is because if we are to understand a contractual construction of morality, then there cannot be any kind of antecedent value system that we are guiding our deliberations. The way in which he illustrates the potency and potential of non-moral constraints is revealed within the anecdote of the narrow bridge, as a means of thinking about how rational agents will act in a world of scarcity and competition, and how those factors will influence bargaining in contractualist agreements.

In my commentary, I will briefly summarize the issues at hand, providing a review of arguments and selected terminologies. Then, I will move to comment on the applicability of contractualism in today's competitive and asymmetrical society. To do so, I will largely focus on the argument inspired by Gauthier and Hobbes found on page 17.

Contractualism is an ethical theory that posits that there is a set of standards that are deliberated *ex ante*, and that people's actions will acknowledge and reflect these principles (p 5). There are many forms of contractualism, including a very similar theory called contractarianism. In the author's form of contractualism it seems that the competitors involved are focused improving their success as competitor without the motivation to make decisions that can drastically negatively impact other competitors, or cooperation to an extent. This point will be elaborated more clearly as I come to the narrow bridge game. One of the issues that arises from this kind of the decision making is the problem of antecedents, which I believe could also be accounted for as the constraint critique of contractualism. The critique states that a theory used to construct a morality cannot be preceded by any kind of existing value systems. The issue at hand is that contractualism naturally seems to demand some kind of "antecedent morality" which manifests in the standards that are produced in contractualist constructions. To be more vivid, let us quickly revisit Scanlon's view. The emphasis is setting standards that maximize mutual recognition

[Similar to the Rawlsian “veil”] while minimizing coercion, these two constraints are value judgements because they represent the virtues of equality and fairness. When contractualists use pre-existing moral constraints, contractualism falls because the agents are abandoning the process of deliberation and construction necessary to the theory. Therefore, in order for contractualism to stand as a theory, there must be some other non-moral way of describing constraints, since it is hard to argue the entire absence of them. The narrow bridge gap game is used as a jumping off point to explain the existence of these *non-moral* constraints. The narrow bridge is meant to simulate scarcity and competition. The scarcity is represented in the narrow bridge, only one competitor can pass through at a time, lest they want to end up causing a crash (p11). The competition is the fact that it is a race, there is a fixed number of spots, and each competitor wants to rank as high as possible. This scenario can be altered and generalized to apply in the real world. What the game is supposed to show is that agents will use rationality as a basis for their actions. Although they will compete and try to self maximize, they will not act in a way as to cause a “narrow bridge crash” [ie: Menelaus pulls back and allows Antilochus to speed forward and take first].

My question to you addresses specifically the argument for non-moral constraints made on page 17, posited with elements from Gauthier and Hobbes. The argument itself is structurally sound, and seems believable in of itself. However, I could not help but wonder what the incentive to follow these kinds of rational constraints would be in a world in a natural state of asymmetrical competition, a world that I believe we inhabit now. The final conclusion (C3) states that a rational competitor would prefer symmetrical competition or a peaceful resolution (p18). This is convincing, it is rational to seek symmetry, symmetry means a more even spread of reward for more people. It also likely means that everyone is acting in a way that will mitigate or prevent narrow bridge crashes. You mention on page 18 that there exists a counterfactual world, the world of might and domination which has a stronger incidence of asymmetrical competition, and that this competition has a higher chance of hurting a random competitor. As a result, and to avoid this world, rational agents will seek to equalize through “peaceful” or what I think of as cooperative agreements, to lessen the effects of this quarrelsome state. All of this still seems correct, but it seems to only reasonably apply if agents are unaware of their status as competitors.

This doesn't seem right, because if competitors weren't factoring in status, contractualist deliberation would appear to occur under the veil of ignorance, and would in turn use moral constraints in its deliberation. I would argue that most agents be they individuals or groups, are aware of their status and what kind of advantages and disadvantages they have within a competitive world. With that second awareness in mind, it seems hard to think that many agents would be motivated to make peaceful agreements with other rational agents, the threat of escalation of "war" would not frighten them because they know that they could weather or retaliate against it. What is a narrow bridge crash in a race that a powerful competitor has already crossed the finish line of? The fact that there is an imbalance of status, even in a world of scarcity, suggests that our reality is already in the asymmetrical alignment, and that agents are already being undermined by stronger, more dominant competitors. Therefore, my two questions to you are thus: how would you reconcile the idea of status awareness in your argument for non-moral constraints, and do you think agents in our competitive world would be motivated to enter contractualist agreements at all?

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this paper, and I hope that some of my comments can help illuminate some areas for further discussion and dialogue. I have tried my best to ensure that my comments reflect a correct assessment of your intentions in terms of ideas and arguments. If I have misstepped, you have my apologies, and hope for a swift clarification of any mistakes.