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THE PARADOX OF BENEFICIAL RETIREMENT: A REPLY TO LENMAN

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In 'The Paradox of Beneficial Retirement' (*Ratio* **18** 2005: 332–337), I proposed a personal and moral paradox about integrity and retirement. This paradox raises the disturbing prospect that many people (perhaps even the majority, in many professions) ought to seriously consider retiring, because they are likely to be replaced by someone who will do their work better than they do it. In 'Why I Have No Plans to Retire: In Defence of Moderate Professional Complacency' (*Ratio*, 20 2007: 241–246), James Lenman forcefully argues that my argument does not succeed.

Before I turn to Lenman's arguments, it is important to note that nothing in them threatens the paradox itself. Even Lenman admits that my pro-retirement case would sometimes be compelling (as in his example of the Assyrian scholar), and this suffices to generate the paradox. As I note at the very beginning of my paper, the paradox does not depend on the wide prevalence of the conflict over retiring (or otherwise leaving one's position); it is enough that a single person would confront it. Nevertheless, if indeed the case for retirement is widely relevant, then this increases the importance of the paradox. As Lenman's challenge concerns this question, of the numbers, we now turn to it.

Lenman's arguments can be usefully divided into two. We can call the first the "argument from additional factors". My case for the need to consider retirement would often be convincing, Lenman admits, if we focus only on comparing two factors: how well person X is doing in his position, compared to how well his replacement, Y, would do instead. But, Lenman says, we need to add to the equation the consideration of other factors: particularly, X's contribution after he leaves in order to make room for Y, and what Y's contribution would have been were she not to have been given this opportunity through X's exit. When those further factors are taken into account, Lenman claims, we see that retirement will be beneficial only in far fewer cases.

I do not think that the additional factors matter much. Take the Xs first: the crucial matter is not whether the retiree is as productive after retirement as he was in his pre-retirement life. Rather, what matters is whether that side effect will significantly affect the judgment of the *overall* good that would emerge from the retirement. And here, by and large, we should be skeptical. Recall that as a result of the Xs of the world remaining in their positions, more serious crimes will be committed, and more hospital patients will be misdiagnosed, as a matter of routine. Results will accumulate most saliently, in body bags. And those bags can remain empty, if only the Xs retire. Except in very unusual circumstances there will be *nothing* of this magnitude on the minus side, if the Xs retire.

Similarly, there is little reason to think that considering the good that the Ys would do if they could *not* replace the Xs (because the Xs would stay put), significantly affects matters. Surely it is, as a rule, preferable that the better people get positions earlier, as they would do if more Xs retired. Surely it is better if the best people do not have to settle for jobs in lesser departments, because there are at present no openings in the best (but nevertheless X-including) ones. And so on.

Lenman's second argument can be called "the argument from the unsuccessful", and raises doubts about the replacements (the Ys). If Xs retire, their positions will be filled from a pool of candidates. The better among the members of that pool are likely to get positions anyway, eventually, even if the Xs do not retire, while those who are less good need not worry us, Lenman claims. They are, after all, equivalent to the "unsuccessful", those of the same age-cohort as the current jobholders, who were not good enough to get positions when the Xs did. Hence even Xs quite low on the scale should not feel that they are holding up someone better than themselves.

This is an ingenious move, but we should not be swayed by it. The complexities here risk overwhelming us. I shall hence focus on only two issues. The first is historically specific, but significant. Current position-holders were typically recruited from a pool of candidates where whole categories of persons were underrepresented (and not adequately evaluated even if considered): particularly women and minorities. Hence, when the current pool of candidates for jobs is compared with that earlier pool, the newer pool is likely to be larger, with greater talent, more variety,

and better promise. This improvement is also likely to continue into the future. Other things being equal, a Y who will not be able to enter the game unless an X leaves will thus often come from a much better pool of candidates.

A second issue is timeless. No matter how promising people might have been, or seemed, and how meritocratic the recruitment processes, in any difficult pursuit results will often be unpredictable. Glittering candidates turn out to have lacked substance from the beginning. Or, they have potential, but do not know how to actualize it. Or, they have the ability to do valuable things, but lack the drive. Or, they had the drive, but lost it in life's vicissitudes. Or, they even do some creative work, but the fountain dries up after a while. Human beings are more mysterious than not, even to themselves. The only thing we can judge with a degree of confidence is that some people have been a disappointment. There might still be miracles, when a silence of decades ends in a burst of creativity, but such unusual events are negligible as compared to the routine of mediocrity, and worse, displayed by people, many of whom once seemed promising. It is manifestly the case that, were such people to leave, the profession and those affected by it would benefit.

No doubt in certain professions and in some circumstances there will be factors limiting the number of people to whom the pro-retirement argument might apply. But my "50% should-consider-retirement" argument was merely a way of emphasizing the issue, and is inevitably schematic. What matters is the personal and moral paradox, and the awareness that it is likely to pertain to a very large number of people. Lenman's arguments do not greatly affect my conclusion that the issue is widely relevant.

In professions of dramatic importance, where life is on the line, the desire to have the best is obvious: we wish that those at the cutting edge of studying and combating terrorism will be as good as possible. We wish our children to be operated upon by the best surgeons, and that those who are much bellow average will leave. Those who train and teach these people also ought to be the finest available. In professions of less dramatic importance, such as in most of the humanities, this call is typically less urgent. But the premium put on creativity in such professions helps my case, for surely we should wish that those who have never produced creatively, or once did but have long since dried up, should make way

for others, who might not otherwise get their chance so early, or so generously, or even at all.[1]

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