Schelling, Thomas C. *Strategies of Commitment and Other Essays.*
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. 360. $39.95 (cloth); $19.95 (paper).

In this collection of essays, Thomas Schelling surveys his work of the past five decades. The lead essay revisits his long-standing interest in the strategic logic of commitment, an idea which serves as a leitmotif throughout the book. Though this book is a delightful read, it cannot be recommended to the specialist except as history. Most of the leading strategic ideas will be familiar to anyone trained in game theory. In fairness, many will be familiar as a result of Schelling's influence, but the point is that most of the ideas have been extended and stated more rigorously elsewhere. Similarly, philosophers interested in the various peculiarities and perversities of instrumental rationality would do better to consult Jon Elster's inevitable contribution on the matter. That being said, the book can be warmly recommended to nonspecialists as a beautifully written survey of the astonishing range of applications for Schelling's key idea: in the words of his Nobel citation, "that a party can strengthen its position by overtly worsening its own options." The book consists of nineteen essays (only one new) organized into several clusters.

STRATEGIES OF COMMITMENT

When Schelling speaks of commitment, he understands the concept as follows: "becoming committed, bound, or obligated to some course of action or inaction or to some constraint on future action. It is relinquishing some options, eliminating some choices, surrendering some control over one's future behavior. And it is doing so deliberately, with a purpose. The purpose is to influence someone else's choices" (1).

For example, a threat is "a commitment . . . to perform or forgo something to one's own (possibly grave) disadvantage that will inflict cost, damage, or pain on the party threatened if the threatened party does not comply, perform or abstain as demanded in the threat" (2). Notice that Schelling delimits the ordinary language usage of "threat" to mean only those cases in which the one making the threat will also suffer some loss in carrying it out. Thus, if I credibly threaten to fight till the death, I must close off any possibility of retreat, which, in one sense, leaves me with a seriously impoverished choice set. In canonical decision theory, extra choices can never make me worse off. Schelling's great insight is that when we move into multiperson strategic situations, this is no longer true. If I can credibly commit to fight till the death, my foe may decide that the costs of fighting me are too high. In a counterintuitive result, I may end up better off than if I had kept my options open.

CLIMATE AND SOCIETY

In this section, Schelling offers us three interesting and timely essays on the public policy of global warming. He considers it inevitable that trends will continue for some time. The developing world will suffer the most from continued global warming, since rising temperatures will primarily affect agriculture, which tends to constitute a larger portion of gross domestic product in developing

countries. Lacking resources to adapt to a changing climate will make developing countries doubly vulnerable. Schelling thus concludes that one of the best ways to protect against global warming is through development.

With regard to lowering greenhouse gases, Schelling is against a worldwide cap and trade system. Instead of abatement, he defends the plausibility of geoengineering—that is, intentionally changing some part of the earth's environment through unnatural processes. One advantage of geoengineering over piecemeal CO_2 abatement is that the former requires fewer commitments by fewer parties. To decrease carbon emissions, countries around the world have to change how people travel, farm, and heat and cool their homes. "Carbon abatement depends on policies that many governments are incapable of implementing because they don't know how, or they haven't the resources, or they haven't the authority, or it is too expensive. But most of the direct geoengineering interventions that have been discussed involve just spending money" (48–49).

However, in Schelling's setup, nations have all the information necessary for making their decisions. One of game theory's great advantages is that it can cut to the essentials, laying bare a situation's potentially counterintuitive logic. But the flip side of this virtue is that if we fail to model some "essential," the results can make us both confident and wildly wrong. Schelling fails to adequately discuss the large sources of uncertainty surrounding geoengineering proposals. Historically, localized attempts to manage habitats by draining swamps and introducing new species have frequently had disastrous effects. Moreover, large scale geoengineering proposals are still mostly speculative in terms of their workability.

In addition, Schelling is too quick in dismissing the viability of abatement. Certainly some policies such as fleet standards and carbon taxes are easily observable. Finally, Schelling's relentlessly instrumentalist framework does not even seem to countenance the idea that developed nations might not press their full advantage in bargaining with the developing world over emissions. Is it naive to suggest that notions of fairness and moral responsibility might affect bargaining outcomes at all?

COMMITMENT AS SELF-COMMAND

In some ways this cluster of four essays should offer the most fertile ground for connecting to the concerns of philosophers. Schelling develops the idea that his theory of commitment can be extended to cover cases wherein the strategic game is being played by two aspects of oneself. For example, the recovering alcoholic, dieter, or smoker precommits to deny himself choices so as to prevent lapses that his present, "rational" self dearly wishes to avoid. In the words of an old catechism, we do well to avoid not just sin but "the near occasion of sin." All of this is interesting so far as it goes. However, Schelling presents these cases and a (sometimes tedious) list of similar phenomena as among "maybe the most important and interesting of the 'lapses from rationality'" (83). Earlier he suggests that the general class of temporal preference problems "is not a phenomenon that fits easily into a discipline concerned with rational decision, revealed preference, and optimization over time" (64). In one sense this is true, but economists have been grappling with the technical aspects of such problems for

some time and, arguably, with great success. For example, Schelling's fellow Nobel laureate, Gary Becker, shows how phenomena such as "rational addition" are far from oxymoronic within the standard framework of neoclassical economics. And for those interested in a more philosophical treatment of the subject, Jon Elster's books (especially *Ulysses and the Sirens* [1979], *Sour Grapes* [1983], and *Solomonic Judgements* [1989]; all published by Cambridge University Press) go beyond Schelling's discussion in their richness and subtlety.

SOCIETY AND LIFE

In the first essay under this heading, Schelling focuses on the right to die. He looks at a variety of different cases in which this issue arises. Schelling points out that a significant majority of Americans favors making it legal for doctors to end the life of a terminally ill patient who makes such a request. Schelling himself is generally sympathetic to such a right as well but not without reservations. He worries that the right to die might be interpreted by some as an obligation to die: "The right to depart this world at least raises the question for dying persons whether the decent thing to do might be to discontinue being a burden, an annoyance, an expense, and a source of anxiety to the people caring for the dying person" (138). Though none of this will be new to those interested in medical ethics, there is a sparseness and detachment to Schelling's discussion that is quite engaging.

In an odd little essay entitled "Should Numbers Determine Whom to Save?" Schelling poses the following problem: "there are two (or several) groups of people who are simultaneously and equally mortally endangered; rescue is available but can serve only one group, but a group of any size" (140). Given this situation, whom should we save? Schelling offers the following rule: always save the group with more people in it. He offers two reasons for adopting such a rule. First, from the perspective of self-interest, we will have a better chance of being saved if ever in danger, since odds are that we will be in the larger group. Second, if we think people should be saved on merit, chances are that they will be in the larger group.

The first reason may have some force on its own terms, but the second strikes us as very weak. First, while more generally virtuous people are more likely to be in the larger group, so are more generally vicious people. Second, if we want to adopt some more specific criteria for "merit," then it would seem that we should try to judge given the particular configuration of circumstances. For example, health economists evaluate policies in terms of "morbidity adjusted life-years." If we were faced, then, with a choice between saving the occupants of a nursery school and a hospice for terminal cancer patients, an appeal to numbers would seem otiose. Finally, if one really felt the need to commit to prestated rules, one might do better to choose rules that induced adaptive behavior. For example, we might commit to first saving housing developments that are not constructed on known flood plains.

ECONOMICS AND SOCIAL POLICY

In this cluster of essays, Schelling explores the role of economics in public debate. Interestingly, however, the question gets turned around. Schelling asks

why economics tends to have so little influence on public policy—whether the issue is abortion, race relations, illegal drugs, crime, health care, or budgetary policy. He considers the possibility that many policy decisions are laden with value judgments that economists themselves fail to agree on. Since economists are split on the correct policy, they find themselves unable to speak with a concerted voice, which is necessary when trying to bring about changes in policy. From our point of view, the most interesting thing here is why anyone would be surprised that an academic discipline should fail to have anything approaching determinative influence on public policies. This question would not even occur to most anthropologists or chemists. Nor would philosophers and political scientists find it puzzling that they should be disregarded, despite their fields' past aspirations to such influence.

One obvious answer, of course, is that Schelling and other economists actually did enjoy major influence in one area: defense policy. Schelling attributes this influence to a combination of two factors: an executive branch increasingly open to input from academics (beginning with the Kennedy administration) and relative consensus among those academics on how to fight the cold war. Speaking with one voice and to an audience in the government willing to listen, economists played a prominent role in the formulation of U.S. defense policy during the latter half of the twentieth century.

WEAPONS AND WARFARE

Schelling leads off this section with two short pieces, one of which should not be missed: "Meteors, Mischief, and War" recounts his role in the development of the film *Dr. Strangelove*. The heart of the section, though, is the essay that looked most exciting upon vetting the table of contents: "Vietnam: Reflections and Lessons." Unfortunately, this essay is most interesting for what it does not say. One would think that, given Schelling's prominent role in the planning for the Vietnam War, he would have interesting insights into the process. Instead, we mostly get well-worn observations—for example, the strategy of deterrence played a role in getting the United States involved in the war (228) and a concern about the nation's honor made it difficult to withdraw (230–31).

Although Schelling never directly discusses his role in the Defense Department during Vietnam, one of his influential ideas—limited war—comes up indirectly. He points out that the Vietnam War never led to an all-out war with the Soviet Union or China. In fact, relations between the United States and these two countries improved during the period. The implication seems to be that Schelling's defense of limited war was justified: the United States proved able to fight a proxy war without being drawn into a larger, potentially catastrophic, conflict. Curiously absent, though, is any consideration of how Schelling's key idea might apply to the notion of limited wars generally and Vietnam in particular—that is, that we might have been made worse off by proving able to fight limited wars.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Schelling leads off this section with a brief essay in what might be called applied philosophy of social science. In it, he investigates the concept of a social mech-

anism and how it can help explain social phenomena. There is nothing philosophically profound here, but it could be useful for practicing social scientists in helping them to reflect a bit about exactly what it is that they are doing.

The real heft of this section, though, is Schelling's wonderful, pathbreaking piece on "Dynamic Models of Segregation." This is the longest chapter in the book, and it might seem of limited interest to philosophers. However, it is a surprisingly good read and displays Schelling at his best, taking simple but nonobvious ideas and showing that they have complex but ultimately obvious consequences. Schelling uses a few rather simple models to demonstrate how marked segregation can arise from people acting on seemingly moderate preferences such as wanting to live among people that are at least half from their own group. As often happens, individual actions have effects in the aggregate that are not intended. People need not be rabidly intolerant in order to yield segregation patterns that would suggest that they are.

Schelling adds many variations to his basic model: he makes it two dimensional, imposes traveling restrictions, alters individuals' preferences, varies the ratios between the two groups, changes the size of individuals' neighborhoods, confines neighborhoods to a closed space, and explores "tipping" phenomena. While there are a number of interesting details, the basic pattern remains discouragingly familiar.

DECISIONS OF THE HIGHEST ORDER

In the book's final essay, Schelling reflects on sixty years passing without a single nuclear weapon being used in war. He focuses on the international taboo against the use of nuclear weapons as an explanation. However, some U.S. administrations actually tried to undermine it—for example, that of President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. They argued that tactical nuclear bombs cause no more damage than the largest conventional bombs. What, then, is the problem with using these small nuclear weapons? Schelling cites two arguments against this line of reasoning, one "intuitive," the other "analytical." The intuitive argument says that if you ask what is wrong with using nuclear weapons, you have already missed the point—using nuclear weapons is simply too horrible to consider. The analytical argument says that it is important to maintain a prohibition on the offensive use of nuclear weapons because, if we start using them, it is the beginning of a slippery slope. Neither of these rationales may be particularly compelling on standard rational choice grounds, yet Schelling (correctly, in our view) embraces them nonetheless.

At almost eighty-six years old, Schelling makes clear that his career, and indeed his life, is drawing to a close. The book has a valedictory tone, though it never lapses into self-indulgence. Schelling is anything but maudlin. For example, as an illustration of active euthanasia, he coolly describes taking his dog to be put down: "The dog then shuddered, relaxed, and was dead," offhandedly adding, "I suffered no trauma, only envy" (133). It is hard not to read this passing remark in the context of his earlier essay, "Against Backsliding": "Agencies, like people, worry about growing old and conservative, losing the capacity for adventure, initiative, innovation. Agencies, like people, worry about becoming too large, about becoming too susceptible to habit. And agencies, like people,

should worry, if they do not, about how to make a graceful exit when life's work is done and it is time to expire" (113). This book serves as a most graceful exit from a life's work that has left the rest of us richer, safer, and wiser.

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Tenenbaum, Sergio. *Appearances of the Good: An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason.*
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Almost thirty years ago, Michael Stocker suggested that the overwhelming philosophical consensus was that "only the good attracts" ("Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology," *Journal of Philosophy* 76 [1979]: 738–53, 739–40). In his compelling *Appearances of the Good*, Sergio Tenenbaum suggests that this consensus has vanished (2). To turn this tide, Tenenbaum defends a "scholastic view" of desire, one that implies that "we desire only what we conceive to be good" (21). By contrast, nonscholastic views—separatist views—deny that conceiving of the object of desire as good is necessary for desiring it, and thus separatist views allow that there can be "gaps" between motivation and evaluation (15).

Tenenbaum's goal is not to show that the scholastic view must be correct and all competitors mistaken but rather to show that the scholastic view is a serious and compelling account of desire and practical reason (14). To that end, this book is divided into three parts. In the first two chapters, Tenenbaum clarifies just what the scholastic view is. The scholastic view implies at least that conceiving of something as good is necessary for desiring it. However, Tenenbaum defends the stronger thesis that desiring is conceiving something to be good, that desires are such "conceivings" (23). While desires involve a kind of evaluative judgment, desires are not unconditional judgments that immediately precede actions (76). A desiring agent only conceives of something as good from a particular evaluative perspective, not an all-things-considered perspective (43).

Tenenbaum notes that "given the teleological character of desire, a desire will always have a certain aim" (30). To be sure, the scholastic view would not be very interesting if 'good' simply means "object of desire"—as, Tenenbaum acknowledges, even separatists could agree (26). So, the scholastic needs a more substantive sense of 'good' for her view to be interesting. But pinning down that substantive sense proves elusive. Tenenbaum suggests variously that "the good" is the formal end of practical inquiry (6), that the good is the abstract characterization of the aim of action (9), that a desire represents its object as something that is worth being pursued (21), and that a desire for a thing should be identified with a positive evaluation of that thing (23). I leave it an open question whether or not separatists can accept that desires can be so characterized.