



Rational Polemics: Tackling the Ethical Dilemmas of Life

Richard Todd Devens

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Richard Todd Devens, in *Rational Polemics*, tackles what he finds irksome and senseless in the current cultural mind-set—taking on everything from God to meter maids, from terrorism to prostitution, from the nature of evil to speed dating—in his irreverent, provocative, and sometimes profane debut book.

Devens challenges readers to both avoid the typical knee-jerk reactions that characterize so much of human thought and behavior and question whether what is being said or done really makes any sense. Such questioning, even of simple concepts, he argues, can help break the cultural trance that inhibits change. For example, Devens asks why it is acceptable for a man, even one who suffers from gynecomastia and has relatively large breasts, to wander shirtless through Central Park, but unacceptable for a woman to do so. Is the issue really one of breasts, or is it a larger issue of how women are seen in the world? He also employs a blend of cynicism, outrage, and humor to plow through such cultural shibboleths as “You can be anything you want to be,” “God has a reason for everything,” and other verbal inanities.

A classically trained professional pianist and piano instructor, Devens began questioning when, as a young Jewish boy, he became aware that “religious” people did not always behave in good or moral ways, and that the things he was taught “didn’t add up.” But while he has some harsh words for religion, which he calls “the universal farce,” and for religious hypocrites, he also recognizes that people have a right to their beliefs, as long as they do not interfere with the rights of others. Personal freedom is a major theme throughout. Devens seems to believe that most anything an individual wishes to do, have, or believe is acceptable as long as it does not cause harm to others; even cannibalism, he writes, can, under extreme circumstances, be justified.

Agreeing with conservative philosophical icon Ayn Rand that “we have no moral obligation to participate in our own destruction,” Devens blasts the idea that a “good Samaritan” should be urged to turn himself in to face punishment for saving an innocent person; that the torture of a terrorist to obtain information is moral when many lives are in danger; and that the death penalty is justified in cases where horrific violent crimes have been committed, and race, financial status, mistakes, and bias have played no role in the conviction. Whether or not one agrees with Devens’s conclusions, such questions merit consideration, and the lively and potent discourse he offers spurs creative thought.

Devens’s writing is clear, to the point, and generally error-free, with the exception of occasional agreement problems such as, “The family of the victims have to live with ...” (where “has” is correct or “family” should be plural). The text is peppered with profanity, which may be a turn-off for some readers, and, if used, “fucken asshole” should be “fuckin’ asshole.” The book’s layout is pleasant and easy on the eye. It is suggested that the notes at the end of the book supply credible reference sources rather than merely serving to extend the author’s own views.

Devens’s congenial intellectual romp, and occasional rant, will be welcomed by those who have also dared to ask such questions, and his ideas will be an encouragement to use rational thought and discourse to follow those questions to their logical conclusions.

KRISTINE MORRIS (December 24, 2013)

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