

## **Between Transcendent and Immanent Rationality: A Response To Emily Robertson**

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If we participate in a rational discussion, we assume that some of our beliefs are contrary to some of the beliefs of others. Without a clash of opinions -- this goes without saying -- a discussion is, by definition, impossible. At the same time, however, we presuppose a certain *common ground* -- a framework of beliefs (criteria, principles, concepts, commitments) that we share with our discussion partners. In a rational debate we try to change the beliefs of others by putting forward reasons or arguments. And such a form of influence can only have a chance of success if our arguments appeal to what our interlocuters already believe, thus to what is common ground between us.

Regarding the common ground of a rational discourse, we can distinguish different positions. On the one hand, there are philosophers who maintain that such a framework of shared beliefs is always limited in time as well as in space. They hold the view that, in a discussion, we are (more or less directly) referring to beliefs and principles that are necessarily part of a particular historical tradition or interpretative community. According to them, there are no non-relative or universal reasons because what counts as a reason is dependent on frameworks of concepts and beliefs that vary from period to period and from culture to culture. Nevertheless, they think that such a discussion can really be rational. The possibility of universal reasons is not required for a rational evaluation of conflicting claims. For them, rationality is *immanent*.

Other philosophers, however, forcefully deny that the common ground is completely contingent. To be sure, they will admit that, in discussions, very often an appeal is made to common beliefs that are local or historical. But that fact does not exclude the possibility of non-relative or universal reasons. In a discourse, they maintain, we can refer to beliefs or criteria that are *ahistorical* and *transcultural*. These aspects of the common ground are fully communal, providing a framework that is shared by *all* rational beings. According to these philosophers, in a discussion that is really rational an appeal is made to such a universal framework. Genuine rational assessment of competing claims requires non-relative reasons. Rationality is *transcendent*.

In her admirably clear and well-wrought argument, Emily Robertson defends the former position. And she convincingly shows that Harvey Siegel predominantly argues in favor of the second position. In this brief comment on the paper of Robertson, I will take a kind of intermediate position. In particular, by referring to (meta-)ethical views, I will try to make plausible the view that rationality has both immanent and transcendent aspects.

Robertson maintains that "the only principles we have and can have are immanent in evolving traditions of rational criticism." Because of its generality this claim seems to me untenable. We can indicate certain principles of assessment that are more or less implicitly endorsed by all rational beings. In particular, I have in mind the principles that can be justified by means of so-called transcendental arguments. In such arguments, a principle is explicated which cannot be denied without self-contradiction. As such, these principles are postulates of any form of critical reflection, including rational discussions.

A well-known example of a principle that can be justified transcendentally is the principle of non-contradiction. Even in discussions in which the validity of this principle is explicitly contested, it is implicitly presupposed and confirmed. Another example is the principle of coherence. Coherence cannot be reduced to consistency. A coherent argument is composed of propositions that are not only consistent, but also mutually supportive. The principle of coherence, too, can be transcendentally justified, since every argument that explicitly queries this principle is implicitly and necessarily presented as a coherent one.

The role of these principles should not be underestimated. Take, for example, discussions on ethical or moral questions. Such arguments often appeal to Kant's categorical imperative (in the so-called "universal law formulation"), or Hare's thesis of universalizability. And both principles can be regarded as adapted versions of the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>1</sup> The principle of coherence also plays an important role in ethical discussions. Think, for example, of Rawls's reflective equilibrium, which has to be regarded as an application of the principle of coherence to the moral-political domain.<sup>2</sup>

But even though the principles of non-contradiction and coherence are important and necessary postulates of ethical reflection, it cannot be denied that their role is limited. If we are discussing conflicting moral views that are internally consistent and coherent, they cannot give us the footing needed to resolve the conflict. The essential differences between such moral views are, I think, ultimately founded in intuitions that are part of traditions. Rawls, for instance, rightly argues that his political conception of justice is rooted in fundamental intuitions that are implicit in the public political culture of democratic societies.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the common ground of ethical discussions includes universal aspects (principles that can be justified transcendentally), as well as non-universal aspects (intuitions that are rooted in traditions). Rationality in the sphere of ethics is both transcendent and immanent.

Epistemological relativism has often been disputed by means of transcendental arguments. According to such arguments, relativism is self-contradictory and therefore self-refuting: that which is explicitly defended -- namely, that our knowledge is relative -- is implicitly, in the very epistemological defense, denied. This is, I think, a very strong argument that is also applicable to the position of Robertson. From a meta-viewpoint she maintains that rational evaluation is immanent -- that is, regulated by frameworks that are embedded in cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, she argues that this meta-statement itself is "the correct description" of our practices of evaluation: reason-giving is, "in fact," always done from a local-historical perspective. Her own epistemological view is presented here as *non*-relative, as based on reasons that are taken to be *not* immanent.

It is important to notice that we cannot escape this transcendental criticism by granting that our own epistemological position is relative too. For then we should also have to admit that other rational beings may have different frameworks and, consequently, that for them, our reasons for supporting our position do not have any epistemic force. Indeed, we should even have to grant the absurdity that these alternative *relative* frameworks may generate good reasons for taking a *non*-relativistic position.<sup>5</sup> That is why there is no escape from claiming that our reasons for our own relativistic epistemological thesis are non-relative or universal -- by which we implicitly deny the content of our own thesis and get entangled in self-contradiction.

The only way to escape such a transcendental argument is by acknowledging that rationality is not completely immanent. What way could that be? As I said before, a moderate relativism regarding the moral domain seems to me a plausible view. Even if principles can be indicated that are ahistorical and transcultural, an appeal to intuitions that are rooted in traditions is most likely inevitable in moral discussions. At the same time, however, it is possible to maintain that this view itself is *not* relative. The meta-ethical thesis that ethical reasons are relative to traditions, can be supported by reasons that are claimed to be universally valid. By thus combining a relativistic

interpretation of ethics with a non-relativistic interpretation of meta-ethics, the transcendental argument is obviously not applicable anymore. But then, again, we should have to acknowledge that rationality has both immanent and transcendent components.

However, can a discussion be rational if the epistemic force of reasons is dependent on local-historical frameworks of beliefs? If no appeal is made to tradition-transcending criteria, how, then, could a so-called rational evaluation be more than a question-begging rationalization?

I agree with Robertson that immanent rationality is possible. What makes a discussion rational is, I think, the fact that the conversation partners are referring in their arguments to common ground. In the absence of a framework of shared beliefs, rational criticism and rational justification are out of the question. Suppose, for example, that Rawls is right when he argues that liberal political theory is finally founded on deep-seated intuitions. Then a rational discussion between a liberal who appeals to these intuitions, on the one hand, and an orthodox Christian or a fundamentalist Muslim who is lacking such commitments, on the other, would, in fact, be excluded. Qualifying such a discussion as rational, would be, as Siegel rightly states, a "misleading honorific."<sup>6</sup>

A *universal* common ground, however, is not a necessary condition of a rational discussion. A justification in which an appeal is made to criteria that are embedded in shared traditions also deserves the title "rational." For example, the fact that a liberal view is based on intuitions that are entrenched in Western democratic traditions does not at all exclude a rational discussion about political principles between persons who share these intuitions.

In other words, discussions in which an appeal is made to immanent criteria are not necessarily rational, while criteria to which an appeal is made in rational discussions are not necessarily transcendent.

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1. See, for example, R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 32-35.

2. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 8, 26, 45. See also Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 17-18, 21.

3. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 13-15, 175. Contrary to this view, Siegel claims that liberal moral principles (like respect for persons, autonomy and democracy) can be justified neutrally, *i.e.* without appealing to ideological intuitions or commitments. See Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 69-72.

4. We could call such an epistemological position "meta-communitarianism." It is important to note that endorsing meta-ethical communitarianism is quite compatible with rejecting ethical communitarianism. In the last section of her paper Robertson seems to opt for such a combination.

5. This point of criticism is related to, but also somewhat different from, Harvey Siegel's *NSBF* ("necessarily some beliefs are false") argument against epistemological relativism. See his *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Boston: Reidel Publishing, 1987), ch. 1.

6. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 62.