

A FEMINIST RETHINKING OF REASONABLENESS: AN EXPERIMENT IN TRANSLATION

Wendy Kohli
Binghamton University

PREFACE

My subtitle refers to the remarks Nick Burbules (NB) made at this meeting during a symposium on multiculturalism. In listening to NB develop his thinking on the problem of translation, I was struck by the possibility that my response to his paper on reasonableness reflects such a problem of translation:

- a translation from one discourse to another.
- a translation from one set of assumptions and concepts to another.

I find more and more that the degree to which I have been exploring various forms of postmodern discourse, particularly poststructuralism, I am rendered inarticulate about most things which I once had been so clear and certain. These days, I often find myself speechless — without words to make any translation — without words to grasp the shift (or break) that may be occurring in my understanding of the world. Consequently, the following remarks may reflect this inarticulateness, through my contradictory frames.

I see this paper as one of at least four moments in an ongoing conversation NB is having on reason and dialogue. I think, for example, of the paper he gave at PES in 1991 in dialogue with Harvey Siegel, the 1992 PES paper with Suzanne Rice, and of their 1992 *Harvard Educational Review* piece, to which Mary Leach made a significant response. All of these papers attend to the concept of reasonableness, developing to a greater or lesser degree, the virtues necessary to be reasonable in dialogue with others. In the 1991 piece, he introduces us to the virtues of reasonableness and asserts that they should be “justified primarily in terms of their ability to promote certain kinds of communicative relations.”¹ In both 1992 pieces, he and Rice develop “communicative virtues,” including among others, tolerance, patience, respect for differences, and a willingness to listen.”² This fourth paper, NB articulates more fully a description of the virtues of reasonableness, including being objective, fallible, pragmatic and judicious.³

Responding to this last paper poses an interesting challenge for me; how am I to enter into a conversation with NB? Given the positions laid out in the paper, I am, in effect, on the spot: do I have the disposition for reasonable dialogue, or do I not? Will I say reasonable things or will I not? Do I dare ask whether this form of academic discourse we are engaging in counts as reasonable communication? And upon what grounds will we decide?

With those questions as a backdrop, I will converse with NB, acknowledging my respect for him and for the thinking he has done on this subject. I know he hopes to make a real difference in the world as a result of it. My questions to him today are offered in the spirit of collaboration in an effort to move his work forward and to engage the audience in spirited, if not reasonable, dialogue.

QUERY 1: REASONABLE WOMEN

I *think* I am a person “who wants to make sense, wants to be fair to alternative points of view...and is willing to admit when [I] make a mistake.” I also want to believe that I have “the capacity to enter into the types of communicative relations in which persons together inquire, disagree, adjudicate, explain or argue [our] views in the pursuit of a reasonable outcome.” At the same time, as a woman-person, I can’t help but be a bit wary of any discussion about reason and reasonableness that proceeds in such a genderless way, NB’s nods to feminism and to marginalized groups notwithstanding. For, as Valerie Walkerdine reminds us, “ideas about reason and reasoning cannot be understood historically outside considerations of gender” and that “the rational self [was in this sense] a profoundly masculine one from which the woman was excluded, her powers not only inferior but also subservient.” This is a powerful and loaded legacy to overcome. I think NB, like Habermas who informs much of his thinking about communicative reason, is open to criticism for not being more explicit about gender.⁴ Even though NB draws more these days on the work of Seyla Benhabib — work that I respect very much — she too is open to this same criticism, as the following quote by Marie Fleming makes clear.

we should not be surprised that, as energetic as Benhabib is in her effort to make room for the “other” sex in communicative reason, this system would continue to produce genderless individuals. But how can these individuals be genderless? Human beings are not spirits, as Benhabib herself reminds us, and everyone has to be *one of two* genders. As several French feminists insist, a patriarchal dualistic logic *requires* that one sex efface the other; the victory always goes to the masculine one. Can women have a place in communicative reason? Not as women, if it is true that the sex of the participants must remain masculine.⁵

Given the historical situation in which we find ourselves, by not naming gender and the relationship between women and reason, are we not colluding in this legacy of collapsing the categories of rationality and man?

QUERY 2: POSTMODERN CRITIQUE: GOING TOO FAR?

There is another moment of dis-ease as I enter in to this dialogue. It has to do with the way NB situates his own critique of formal reason in the context of its ongoing deconstruction by certain feminists and poststructuralists. As a “reasonable person,” he gives an account of what he thinks are the valid aspects of this critique at the same time that he points to its limitations; he gives an “on the one hand, on the other hand” exercise in “reasonableness.” At the same time, he clearly states that (what he calls) the postmodern critique may “go too far.” I want to ask him just what counts as “going too far,” and for whom? He never addresses this head on. Although I have some of the same misgivings as he does about some of the implications of postmodernism, I think he is obligated to elaborate on his position. If NB is as committed to situatedness and contextual meanings as he maintains in this paper, I expect that he would *situate himself* in his conversation and qualify the limits of his authority to define the “we” in his speech. If it is *he* who is uncomfortable with postmodernism “going too far,” perhaps he should say so and not generalize. Perhaps this is a moment for some self-reflexivity on NB’s part; what has brought him to write about reasonableness and dialogue at this historical juncture? How are his investments reflected in the way he conceptualizes reason and in his response to postmodernism?

QUERY 3: THE LANGUAGE OF THE SELF/OF PERSONHOOD

This leads to another area I find problematic, as did Mary Leach in her 1992 *HER* response.⁶ Although I see a slight improvement over the traditional language of rational “man,” employing the language of “persons” still relies on a liberal humanist, socially unmediated notion of the self. NB need not subscribe to a poststructuralist critique to see that individuals are socially constructed and historically situated. Marxists and feminists of various persuasions have made apparent, to a greater or lesser degree, the raced, classed, sexed and gendered nature of “personhood.” One is not “*just a person*,” with different “personalities,” or even with individual values and dispositions. I would like to suggest that the discourse of “personalities” is no longer up to the task of understanding our differences. We need other frameworks to grasp our individual and social identities.

This is no small matter for NB's agenda, for one's identities very much influence how one understands what it means to be in the world, to be in dialogue with others, and even, I dare say, to be reasonable. And although NB pays lip service to "the elements of personal characteristics, context and social relations that support and motivate reasonable thought and conduct,"⁷ I want to echo Leach's concern about his reliance on an "individualistic ontology." This approach does not fully take into account the effects of power and oppressive social conditioning. By using "virtue" language, and speaking of a "certain *kind* of person," NB implies a moral framework for his assessment of reasonableness; that somehow a person is "less than" if she does not "possess or acquire" these virtues.

QUERY 4: VIRTUES AND SYSTEMATIC OPPRESSION

It is not that I take strong objection to the virtues he articulates. Nor do I mind his vision of reason as "a practice growing out of communicative interactions in which the full play of human thought, feeling and motivation operate." These are admirable ideals. But they are ideals. Even though he insists that they "each can be explored in ways that do justice to the diversity of human thoughts, values and forms of life," I think that NB has jumped one step too far. He needs to spend more time elaborating the effects of these systematic differences on each of the virtues he names.

It is certainly possible that someday we may not have to attend to differences caused by systematic social conditioning; to the raced, classed, gendered and sexed ways we act in the world. That time, however, is not now. In order to avoid the reproduction and the reinscription of the same inequalities, I think we must name the forms these differences take and find ways to disrupt their power.

I am interested, as is NB, in the educative moment, the educational aim, of reasonableness. But for me this entails understanding the conditions that must obtain for this process to succeed. What gets in the way of each of us being reasonable? I don't think the moral language of virtues is all that helpful here. I think the class, race, gender, and sexuality of a person will greatly influence her capacity to be objective, fallible, pragmatic or judicious, at any given time and place, as will the make-up of the group. One does not "get objective" and then therefore "be objective" equally well in all times, at all places, with all people. NB addresses this in passing when he says that "developing tolerance, for example, depends upon the kinds of communicative and other social interactions one has had with others throughout the course of one's life." And he acknowledges that in certain "real human interactions," being tolerant, for example, may *not* be a reasonable response. I would like to see him develop this line of his thinking more, taking into account the relationship between social identities and communicative virtues.

QUERY 5: EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The last point I want to raise is epistemological, and reminiscent of some of the problems in my own work in critical hermeneutics. It also reflects my paradigmatic schizophrenia as I work back and forth between two frames. In NB's admirable attempt to de-formalize reason and make it a situated, contextualized process, he skirts some difficult epistemological issues. With a certain amount of aplomb, he tries to fend off criticism in this area when he announces that "the epistemic dimension of reasonableness is thereby inverted: the question is no longer, "What procedures of inquiry or argument are most likely to yield the Truth?" but rather "When people have sought to understand the truth of their situation, what are the general patterns of investigation that they have settled upon over time?" No matter how savvy this move seems, I think he is still avoiding an important criticism raised by Harvey Siegel in 1991. Although NB's focus on reason as a process is intriguing, even innovative, mustn't we still be concerned with *what* is said; is not the *content* about which we are communicating and the reasons we use to support that content important?

Enough for now. I leave it to you to decide if this has been a reasonable response. Just let me know the criteria you chose to use, and why.

¹ Nicholas C. Burbules, "Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Virtues of Reasonableness," in *Philosophy of Education, 1991*, ed. Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 219.

² Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (1992): 411.

³ Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rethinking Rationality: The Importance of Being Reasonable," *Philosophy of Education, 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993).

⁴ Valerie Walkerdine, *School Girl Fictions* (London: Verso Press, 1990), 67.

⁵ See for example, Marie Fleming's essay, "Women's Place in Communicative Reason," in *Women and Reason*, ed. Elizabeth Harvey and Kathleen Okruhlik (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 245-62.

⁶ Marie Fleming, "Women's Place in Communicative Reason," in *Women and Reason*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Kathleen Okruhlik (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 253.

⁷ Mary Leach, "Can We Talk? Response to Burbules and Rice," *Harvard Educational Review* 62, no. 2 (1992): 257-63.

⁸ Burbules, "Two Perspectives on Reason," 218.

⁹ Harvey Siegel, "Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Rationality of Reasonableness," in *Philosophy of Education, 1991*, ed. Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 230.
