

RETHINKING RATIONALITY: ON LEARNING TO BE REASONABLE ¹

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“Be reasonable,” we are sometimes told, and in many contexts this is felt as a rebuke or, even worse, as a command to silence one’s thoughts and feelings. When reason is held to be a strict adjudicator of legitimate and illegitimate expression, its effect is often to suppress those beliefs and values which do not measure up to its standards. This formalist conception of rationality has fallen under withering attack by current postmodern writers, especially those speaking from poststructuralist and/or feminist perspectives. I want to explore the compelling elements of their critique, while questioning some of their conclusions.

First, I think that it is true, as many postmodernists say, that there is something inherently discursive about any ordering system for thought. We invent or create the rules we choose to live by, through the ways that we speak and interact with one another. We do not discover them waiting, pristine and fully-formed, to be uncovered through the contemplations of pure reason. Over the course of our collective cultural history *we make them up*. This is true even for the conventions of argumentation themselves. Although we now speak, think, and act in ways that have become second nature to us, this is not evidence that they are universal or necessary for *all* legitimate speech, thought, and action. But the validity of this criticism does not yield the conclusion that all alternative forms of speech, thought, and action are equally good or in principle beyond comparison. There is *some* nonarbitrary reason why we think and act the way we do. When a particular way of adjudicating competing claims about truth, value, or proper course of action has been retained, developed, and refined over a long period of time, there must be something to recommend it beyond the preferences of a particular group that advocates it; it must be fulfilling a complex set of purposes, and its very persistence over time suggests a flexibility and efficacy that not all alternatives can match. And here is a lesson: *This is an important form of justification in itself.*

Second, I think that the criticism that formal conceptions of rationality have excluded or denigrated considerations of affect and related noncognitive elements of thought and feeling, has merit. It is certainly true, at the level of social interaction, that an exaggerated bias toward a formal, impersonal way of expressing or justifying ideas has in fact excluded or disadvantaged potential participants (especially women and certain ethnic and racial groups) from the discussion that is -- or should be -- an open society. Beyond this, it can be argued persuasively that the actual *substance* of our beliefs and values has been distorted as a result; the clearest case for this, I think, has been in the area of ethics, where feminist authors such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings have pointed out that modes of understanding and judgment more typical of women have been neglected by traditional accounts of moral reasoning, to the *disadvantage* of our appreciation of the range of moral understandings and sentiments. I think an equally telling argument can be framed for the inclusion of affective and noncognitive elements in the dynamics of reasoning generally; for if reason has a discursive or communicative grounding, as I will suggest momentarily, then part of the process of creating and maintaining effective communicative relations will entail matters of feeling, empathy, and concern. But arguing for a more inclusive and multifaceted conception of reason is not the same thing as abandoning the value of any sort of reasonable standards. On the contrary, it is to *reinforce* the value of standards, because the very values of tolerance and openness to diversity of modes of thought and feeling express such standards.

Third, I think that there is a valid core to the concern that the presumed neutrality and universality of a particular style of rational thought and speech typical of modern, Western cultures has been taken as the essential node toward which all other cultures must converge. There does seem to be a kind of cultural imperialism at work here. But the very capacity of “Third World” critics to identify, comprehend, question, and reject certain forms of Western thought has itself been facilitated by some features of that very mode of thought. This suggests that they are, if not necessary and unavoidable, at least *difficult* to avoid; and it certainly should give pause to the assertion that they are entirely pernicious.

Fourth, I think that Richard Rorty and other neopragmatists are correct that considerations of context and purpose are intrinsic to the determination of what it is reasonable to do, and that a significant shortcoming of the formal conception of rationality has been the presumption that one can deduce, a priori, conclusions that will be compelling or true across all circumstances. This false universalism underestimates the extent to which reasoning is a situated human achievement, undertaken within communities of inquiry and conversation. But it would be a mistake to assume that this requires that what any such communities might happen to conclude are equally valid, that there is no way to compare them, or that in practice certain conclusions cannot come to be shared by most or all. It is simply to say that when this happens, it is not because they have arrived at the same ineluctable “truths.” It is not surprising, after all, that human groups, confronted with similar questions or problems, will often arrive at similar or comparable conclusions; nor is it surprising that some can accept or learn from those of others. In my view, this tendency supports the hope that reasonable conclusions can be generalized across contexts and purposes; but this possibility does not make those conclusions universal -- it simply encourages us to hope that some overlap and agreement among different perspectives are possible.

Where do these criticisms, if we accept them in this limited form, leave us? What is left if we abandon the idea of rationality as a neutral arbiter of the rules of clear thinking; a dispassioned means for reaching indubitable conclusions; a universal guide to human thought and conduct; and a timeless story line, playing itself out across the history of human evolution as we pursue the capacity for pure and untainted ratiocination? What if, instead, we regard reason as a human invention and achievement, one that is hardly arbitrary, since it has arisen in similar forms under many different circumstances and constraints, but one that is neither necessary nor universal? What if we regard reason as a practice growing out of communicative interactions in which the full play of human thought, feeling, and motivation operates? What if we accept that the only basis for generalizing the merits of reason is a concrete, specific, educative process in which we try to engage others in this way of thinking? If we are successful *this shows* that it is generalizable, and if we fail it shows that it is not. Finally, what if we ground the benefits of reason in nothing more or less than that it allows us to answer certain kinds of questions, solve certain kinds of problems, adjudicate certain kinds of disagreements, and so on, not because it is the essential or necessary guide to all human thought and action?

What we are left with, I believe, is a good deal of the architecture of what we actually *do* when reasoning (logical deduction is a useful way to think through certain arguments, for example), but with a much more modest set of claims about its range of utility or its generalizability to persons and groups who might have evolved different ways of answering questions, solving problems, adjudicating disagreements, and so on. In its place are some very general dispositions that more broadly guide reflective thought and action. In short, I think we are left with a substantive conception of reason -- reasonableness -- which I will suggest can be maintained in the face of these postmodern criticisms without falling entirely into relativism.² What is this substantive conception?

I want to suggest that “reasonableness” refers to the dispositions and capacities of a certain kind of person, a person who is related in specific contexts to other persons -- not to the following of formal rules and procedures of thought. A common trend, for example, in much current writing on critical thinking is to suggest the limitations of “logicality” as an approximation of what a critical thinker is

and does; rather, we need to supplement the skills of logical reasoning with dispositions to apply them in contexts of practice. In some cases, unfortunately, the characterization of these dispositions is rather thin: the difference between the logical rule “always test a syllogism for valid structure” and the “disposition to test syllogisms for valid structure” is hardly worth talking about. Similarly, the “rational passions” discussed by Israel Scheffler and others, such as a passion for rigor and clarity, are sometimes little more than the rephrasing of formal criteria in an emotive language. For this reason, along with others, I will prefer the term “virtues” to “dispositions.” Virtues are flexible aspects of character, expressed out of our sense of self and integrity, but also fostered and encouraged by the communities and relations with others that provide the context in which we choose and act. The term “disposition” does little to suggest this richness and complexity.

A stronger characterization of reasonableness as a human characteristic and achievement requires, first of all, a much deeper conception of how virtues affect conduct: they are not simply the activating sentiments that motivate us to apply the formal rules we have learned, but the aspects of character that bring us to care about learning or paying attention to such criteria in the first place. They are part of who we are. A person who is reasonable wants to make sense, wants to be fair to alternative points of view, wants to be careful and prudent in the adoption of important positions in life, is willing to admit when he or she has made a mistake, and so on; and these qualities are not exhibited simply by following certain formal rules of reasoning. They are enormously more complex than that, since they are manifested in a broad range of situations that are not governed by such formal rules. Because they are more basic and extensive than any set of rules, these virtues might even be manifested in specific situations by ignoring some of these rules (as when someone violates the norm of strict precision and accuracy in trying to express a simple idea to a child). In this view, it is because persons are reasonable, or want to be, that they should concern themselves with “logicality” as a useful heuristic for ordered thought.

The second and related dimension of reasonableness concerns the capacity to enter into the types of communicative relations in which persons together inquire, disagree, adjudicate, explain, or argue their views in the pursuit of a reasonable outcome (that is, an outcome that reasonable people are satisfied with). The dispositions of reasonableness described above are manifested in the ways that persons speak with and listen to one another. This communicative aspect is chiefly what makes the pursuit and attainment of reasoned positions a *practical* and *contextual* endeavor. The apparent circularity of saying that reasonable people pursue understandings in a particular way, and that a reasonable conclusion to such deliberations is simply what the persons involved settle upon, is less a circle than a back-and-forth feedback process. We judge the adequacy of our reasoning and conversation by the efficacy and social acceptability of the conclusions they derive; and we judge in turn the reliability of our conclusions by the thoroughness and care of the processes by which we reached them.

What makes this a substantive conception, then, is that the outcome of a given line of inquiry often cannot be settled conclusively in advance or inferred by tracing out a particular logical argument; rather, the process of reasoned inquiry is manifested in the thoughts, conversations, and choices that the actual persons involved pursue toward some conclusion -- and if they are reasonable people, this conclusion is as reliable as any can be. Of course, that conclusion might be mistaken, but it can be recognized as such and rectified only through a further extension of the same process. 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?”

Among these patterns of investigation, the rules of logic or scientific inquiry play an important but limited part, because they are effective as such only in social contexts of communication, practice, and judgment. The difficult question, then, concerns the nature of these contexts, and how we conduct ourselves in them; in a short essay I can only sketch an answer. My strategy is to select four

traits that seem central to reasonableness (objectivity, fallibilism, pragmatism, and judgment), and to show how they can be translated from a formal, decontextualized language to one concerned with personal character, practical contexts, and communicative relations. My purpose is to show that these characteristics are both richer and more effective when we understand them in this way; that they are better able to withstand some of the postmodern criticisms discussed earlier; and that they lead more directly to educational projects.

Being objective. What, in fact, is necessary in order for a person to adopt an objective standpoint? Two conditions appear crucial. The first is an attitude of tolerance, the capacity to regard alternative positions without a “rush to judgment.” An objective person is one who can withhold his or her own opinions in an engagement with other points of view. This capacity is fostered, not primarily by the exercise of certain intellectual skills, but by the exercise of a demeanor and capacity for restraint. There are many other aspects of tolerance as well: being able to recognize what one’s own biases might be, acknowledging the limits of one’s capacity to appreciate fully the viewpoints of others, or caring enough about others to exert the effort necessary to hear and comprehend what they are saying. My point here is that lacking such characteristics, a person cannot enact that component of reasonableness we call “objectivity.” And the acquisition and exercise of these characteristics is clearly not a purely cognitive/rational endeavor. On the contrary, it has nothing to do with a lack of commitment, caring, or feeling.

Nor is the acquisition and expression of this virtue an individual achievement. 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. Moreover, viewing these capacities in the context of real human interactions also helps make clear when tolerance might *not* be a reasonable response: when one has reached the limits of one’s capacities to be detached, or when certain points of view are so repugnant that it is unrealistic and unreasonable to expect one’s self not to judge them.

Being objective requires a pluralistic sentiment. Objectivity is supported, not by the position of holding no view, but by the position of having regarded enough other views thoughtfully and sympathetically to realize that each has something to be said for it, so that one is distanced somewhat from the attitude that there is or can be one “best” way of all. This pluralism is fostered, of course, partly by having been exposed to a sufficient range of differences, but also by engaging them in some process of give-and-take that has enabled one to consider seriously the merits of each. This, it seems to me, is a chief talent of persons whom we consider to be “objective” -- and it is, I think, a fundamentally different analysis of that virtue than those normally found in the literature.

What this line of argument suggests is that in the pursuits of objectivity, values such as tolerance and pluralism are *methodological* as well as *moral* edicts. Our thinking will be richer, more balanced, and more fair when we are able to hear and consider a variety of alternatives. Being able to do so requires not only some intellectual capacities, but also aspects of character, personal relations, and social contexts that encourage and support the development of this virtue. We all know persons who have great intellect but who cannot detach their critical capacities sufficiently to hear and consider alternative points of view. To that degree, they lack objectivity. Similarly, persons who can listen to anything and not react critically to it seem to lack a kind of discernment. At both extremes, I would suggest, these people fail to be reasonable.

Accepting fallibilism. In my mind, one of the great aphorisms of modern philosophy is Karl Popper’s reminder not to be afraid of making mistakes, because it is only through the discovery of error, through some process of falsification, that we are driven to change. Indeed, Popper’s recommendation seems to extend far beyond the confines of scientific hypothesis testing, where it is typically applied, to a broader vision and attitude toward life. In a variety of contexts, both personal and professional, intellectual and emotional, we all have experience with failure, error, and disappointment. If we can live with these, as we must, it is usually with the understanding that they have formed us, taught us something, strengthened our capacity to endure change. In this broader sense, the acceptance of fallibilism is a component of a reasonable character.

What is involved in this virtue? First of all, it requires us to make certain commitments, or take certain risks, that run the possibility of error. Purposely hiding behind obscurantism, withholding commitment, or playing it safe by only conforming to the conventional and obvious, are all ways of avoiding mistakes -- and hence, ultimately, of avoiding learning and change. Second, it requires a capacity to recognize that one is wrong, which is fundamentally linked with the capacity to *admit* (to oneself and to others) that one was wrong. This includes our capacity to hear and respond thoughtfully to the criticisms of others. Third, it involves a capacity for reflection, as we ponder not only that we *have* made a mistake, but also why it happened and how we can change to avoid repeating it in the future. Once again, we know individuals who have all the intellectual skills one could admire, but who find it difficult to acknowledge error. This is a defect from the standpoint of a reasonable character. However, it would be a mistake to regard this entirely as a shortcoming of the individual, and not as a breakdown in a broader developmental context that implicitly and often explicitly rewards unreasonable conduct. Sometimes it is dangerous to admit error, and sometimes the damage done to personal relations or self-esteem make admission of one's mistakes a punishable offense. In the university context, for example, the rise of an adversarial method as the primary model of academic engagement frequently rewards those who are most vigorous in defending their own point of view and attacking those of others.

Notice, please, that I am not suggesting that the give-and-take of criticism within communities of inquiry is illegitimate; on the contrary, it is a crucial process in a culture that recognizes fallibilism as the pivot point of change. But when this process takes place in a system of "high stakes" rewards and punishments; when certain aggressive aspects of personality and verbal style are falsely taken to be proxies for a healthy critical process; when the pressures and power relations of such contexts are such that certain prospective participants are intimidated from entering the conversation, then we mistake the *forms* of debate and critical interaction for the *substance* of carefully and sympathetically comparing the merits of a range of points of view and subjecting them to some process of thoughtful scrutiny and revision. We should not be surprised in these contexts when people have developed a razor-sharp capacity to dissect the ideas of others but a stultified capacity to alter or abandon their own presuppositions.

Reasonableness, on this view, expresses a capacity for change, a change prompted by one's own recognition and acknowledgment of error, but also supported by a social environment in which this process is regarded with favor, not disdain. "Falsifiability" is normally taken in the literature to be a description of the characteristics and history of a theory or research program; but it includes more than this, since theories are held by persons and because research programs comprise individuals with various personal, institutional, and (often) financial interests in maintaining and perpetuating their positions. Hence "falsifiability," and conceptual change as a result, are achievable not only because of the features of a particular intellectual framework, but because of the capacities for facing up to and responding to error on the part of those who hold it.

Embracing pragmatism. In using this term, I am not trying to invoke a specific school of thought, such as the pragmatism of Dewey, James, or Peirce. Rather, I am referring to a deeper underlying attitude which I think characterizes that general world view: a belief in the importance of practical problems in driving the process of intellectual, moral, and political development. Such an outlook is sensitive to the particulars of given contexts and the variety of human needs and purposes. Most important to my purposes here, it reflects a tolerance for uncertainty, imperfection, and incompleteness as the existential conditions of human thought, value, or action, yet also recognizes the need for persistence and flexibility in confronting such difficulties.

The central lesson of fallibilism in philosophy, from Socrates to Popper, is that we proceed, not towards truth, but away from error. It is much easier to know when we are wrong than when we are right; and the philosophical consequence of this insight, I believe, is a distrust of teleological conceptions of rationality. We rely on certain approaches to inquiry, including the conversational ones noted earlier, not because we can be sure that they will yield a convergence around truth or

agreement, but because experience has shown them to be reliable ways of avoiding certain egregious kinds of mistakes. There is no guarantee built into them to produce what we seek; we merely expect that whatever they yield is more likely to be dependable than what we might garner from any other approach. Such a commitment to a process of inquiry or negotiation, without certainty of its results, is what defines the pragmatic attitude; and this is a primary feature of reasonableness, I believe.

A reasonable person is frequently in situations where insufficient information is available, where problems appear intractable, where outcomes are unpredictable. Here, most of all, we see his or her capacities tested. We expect people to be reasonable in contexts and activities with which they are familiar, and where they are confident; the threats to reasonableness are when conventional responses fail, when doubts prevail. In such difficulties, what makes the responses of a person reasoned and reliable is whether he or she can approach the present problems with an open mind, a willingness and capacity to adapt, and persistence in the face of initial failure or confusion.

In this case, as in the others I have discussed, these capacities operate at a much deeper and more pervasive level than any particular set of skills or strategies -- although, certainly, having some appropriate skills, having experience with similar situations, and having some track record of success in coping with them are also relevant to whether a person will respond constructively to a new challenge. Also supportive of such capacities are social contexts in which an emphasis on success is not exaggerated; in which failure or frustration are accepted as inevitable conditions of growth; and in which offering cooperative assistance and constructive suggestions -- or asking for them -- are socially and personally acceptable options. Once again, this provides a quite different characterization of the person who is reasonable and of the type of context that fosters and supports reasonable conduct.

Exercising judgment. As I have already suggested, one of the reasons that a dispositional account of reasonableness is prior to, and not just a supplement for, an emphasis on “logicality” is that one of the chief characteristics of a reasonable person is the ability to judge, to distinguish situations in which a rational calculation in the narrow sense might be called for, and when it is not. I think we need to build into the concept of reasonableness an awareness of its own limitations: that a reasonable person is one who knows when *not* to try to figure certain things out in a particular rational way, and who regards the skills of rationality and the assessment of reasons as simply heuristics in the much more complex process of trying to decide what to believe and what to do -- heuristics that can help guide our choices, but not govern them. It is not reasonable to try to apply the analysis of logic, or the strict rules of evidence, or the critique of informal fallacies, to each and every situation; we would react very peculiarly to someone who did (this is the perennial joke about Mr. Spock on *Star Trek*, of course).

Part of judgment, as well, is a capacity for prudence and moderation, even in the exercise of reason itself. We are not always reasonable; we occasionally fail to act upon our own best inclinations; we frequently fall short of our aspirations. Acknowledging and accepting this in ourselves, and in those around us, and asking others to accept it in us, is related to the acceptance of fallibilism and the willingness to embrace imperfection and incompleteness that I called part of the pragmatic spirit; it is the recognition of the patterns of grey-on-grey that typically background human choice and action. There is often more than one reasonable thing to believe, to say, or to do; and it is part of the fallacy of formalistic conceptions of rationality that they seek a determinative calculus that will converge on the one “best” or “right” answer.

Here, as in the other elements of reasonableness as I have described them, the key virtues are a capacity to hold competing considerations in balance, and to accept tensions and uncertainty as the conditions of serious reflection. Such broad capacities as paying attention to “relevant” information, respecting complexities and uncertainties, keeping an open mind to alternative points of view, and appreciating the limitations of one’s tools of inquiry as well as their utility, are not *formal* capacities -- yet without exercising such judgments, we cannot be reasonable in any full sense of the term.

Related to this point, our attainment of reasonableness is a matter of degree: some times we are more reasonable than others; around some people we are more reasonable. Our aspiration is not to cross some ultimate barrier from the “irrational” to the “rational,” but to improve, through a process of learning and development, our capacities to be reasonable, and those of others with whom we interact. This awareness should *increase* our sense of interdependence and kinship with others, and provide a healthy counterbalance to the smug confidence that we can answer every question, solve every problem, or resolve every dilemma on our own.

Finally, those whom we respect as reasonable are judicious about when and how they follow the dictates of argument in the strict sense of the term, and they are receptive to the influence of other kinds of persuasion as well. In the actual practice of human communication, strict and conclusive argument are very rare; alongside that is an enormous range of interlocutory styles, including questions, allusions, unsubstantiated suggestions, metaphors, and other tropes, as well as an even broader range of expressions, gestures, touches, musical sounds, and other kinds of communication. The capacity of all these sorts of utterances to move us is “extra-rational” only in a very narrow sense of that term. When we endeavor to be reasonable in social contexts of interaction, this entails remaining open to the influences of other avenues of mutual exploration, negotiation, and the pursuit of understanding. In this endeavor, a respect for the force of reasons is crucial, as is the attempt to be clear, coherent, and accurate in what one says. But it is not everything.

In a fuller argument, I would try to show how this characterization of being reasonable avoids the postmodern criticisms summarized at the start of this essay. But I hope the outlines of a response are fairly clear. Conceiving of reasonableness as a set of virtues does not commit us to a belief in a master narrative or a pure meta-discourse; on the contrary, characterizing reason as a concrete, imperfect, human attainment responds sympathetically to the criticism that rationality has been abstracted from the field of human interrelationships and politics. The elements of objectivity, fallibilism, pragmatism, and judgment each can be explored in ways that do justice to the diversity of human thoughts, values, and forms of life, without falling into a relativism that is unable to recommend or criticize any manner of thinking about the complexities and ambiguities of human existence. While being flexible enough to accommodate a broad range of human processes of communication, investigation, or negotiation, these four elements also provide a basis for excluding others that can be shown to be counterproductive to intelligent, committed, and caring thought and action. It is the hallmark of a reasonable person to be able to consider a range of worthy possibilities, and to acknowledge the potential benefits inherent in each, without becoming incapable of choosing or judging between them (while acknowledging at the same time that others might legitimately choose *from among that range* differently).

Finally, this conception of reasoning has an essential *educational* element, not only because of the general problem of how to foster and encourage these characteristics in new learners, but because the conception I am proposing requires an educational process at the level of its very definition and justification. In each of the four elements I have discussed -- objectivity, fallibilism, pragmatism, and judgment -- the process by which we exercise and cultivate these virtues involves us in a set of communicative interactions (i.e., educative interactions) with others. They are neither acquired nor exercised in isolation. Reasonableness is an educational aim because it is bound to and illuminates fundamental aspects of how the process of education itself occurs: through encountering new, challenging, and often conflicting ideas; through making mistakes and trying to learn from them; through persisting through levels of difficulty and discouragement to something new and worthwhile; and through learning to judge in practice both the applicability and the limits of the general principles and skills one acquires. Each of these, in turn, depends upon a range of communicative and other relations the learner forms with other people; objectivity, fallibilism, pragmatism, and judgment ought to be conceived as *social*, as well as individual, attainments. Through the exercise of these we *learn to be reasonable*.

¹ This essay benefitted from the comments and suggestions of Chip Bruce, Melissa Orlie, Ralph Page, and Harvey Siegel.

² Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Virtues of Reasonableness," in *Philosophy of Education 1991*, eds. Margret Buchmann and Robert Floden (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 215-24; Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness: A Discussion of Harvey Siegel's *Relativism Refuted* and *Educating Reason*," *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (1991),: 235-52.
