

## Keep Hope Alive

James E. McClellan, Jr.

*Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi*

According to Paul Dietl, whose memory has already been invoked to bless this occasion, a philosopher is someone who seeks to say something both new and true about something important. Nothing could be more important than the defense of rationality in a world sinking daily deeper into terminal madness, and the President of PES Emily Robertson has found a way to be both truthful and original in undertaking that defense. Paul, I am sure, is somewhere standing to applaud her performance here today.

To defend rationality, must one first say what it is? Harvey Siegel is not alone in finding it difficult (dare I say impossible?) to define reason by specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for its attainment.<sup>1</sup> Robertson has chosen an indirect route, a flanking movement, around that seemingly intractable problem of definition. Let us consider “alternatives” to reason, she says, that we may see more clearly what is missing when it is absent. Her move has historical precedents in philosophy. Nearly four hundred years ago, Francis Bacon identified four “Idols” blocking the progress of reason; one might think to line them up and seek parallels in Robertson’s four “alternatives to rational persuasion.” That is a futile move. Bacon, clearly distinguishing between the two, traces out both widely shared false beliefs that block rational thought and also general mental dispositions that have the same effect.<sup>2</sup> Robertson is concerned with neither of those, focusing instead on the “phenomenological stance” of an individual participant in a distinctive form of social interaction, one she modestly labels a “conversation.” Right here, it seems to me, is where truth and originality stand forth most clearly in her essay. She says, “I see the practices of rational persuasion as the social ground in which the normative concept of rationality is rooted.” (Is there among us one who does not wish that he or she had written that sentence?)

Let us agree to treat “rational” as a “teleological concept,” defined by the end it envisages; thus “rational belief aims at truth, rational action at success, rational desire at the good, and so on, however these end states might be defined.” A couple of amendments might be in order for that particular formulation. Let us substitute “happiness” for “success” as the end state sought by rational action, noting that we define the former in strict Aristotelian terms.<sup>3</sup> And let us delete “and so on,” for there are no further terms *at that level of universality* to add to the trio of desire, belief, and action.

We are asked to hold that goal-seeking impetus in mind as we consider the phenomenological stance of a person fully participating in the social practice of rational persuasion. What can you say about such a stance? Well, that it is not that of interest group politics, or mediation and diplomacy, and so on through the “alternatives” laid out as instructive examples but is, instead, an activity satisfying, to one degree or another, criteria drawn from those same parables. Many points made along the way invite comment and commendation, but let us not lose sight of the

chief objective here, which is “to say something to those who genuinely ask ‘Why care?’” about rationality in general.

A precedent more recent than Bacon’s calls itself to mind here. One hundred twenty-two years ago, Charles Sanders Peirce’s “Fixation of Belief” set out to distinguish rationality (his own thoroughly developed conception thereof) from its alternatives.<sup>4</sup> Like Robertson today, and unlike Bacon, whose *New Organon* is crammed with contemptuous contempt, Peirce was respectful in his treatment of less than rational methods for fixing belief. More *a propos* here, he advanced an essential argument for caring about rationality, one coming from insistence that the trio of aims defining rationality are connected at the most fundamental level. Action is impelled toward the satisfaction of desire. Action is guided by belief about what is required to satisfy desire. When the desire is for the good, and the guiding belief is true, then action and agent are virtuous, and an instance of human happiness graces our moral planet. (It is not even necessary that the action succeed in satisfying desire, for the world, most happily, is full of contingencies; required only is that on evidence available to the agent, action taken was rationally calculated to achieve the good.) So, if the doubter cares about satisfying *any desire at all*, then he or she should care about reason; for, by definition, action guided by reason is more likely to satisfy its motivating desire than any “alternative.”

This conclusion, I should emphasize, is but a re-statement of Bacon’s dictum that “Knowledge is power,” the key to his entire philosophical work. Robertson recognizes the truth and cogency of this tradition of argument but somehow does not find it sufficient to satisfy all doubt about why one should care about rationality. That seems to me an interesting comment on our own *Zeitgeist*, the force of contingency in life having grown so strong that true belief appears no better guide to consequential action than rankest superstition. Apart from such repudiation of thought in general, I can imagine no argument stronger in force than straightforward utilitarianism nor understand how it could be insufficient to satisfy any but hyperbolic doubt about reason’s value. Perhaps Robertson could enlighten us on that point.

It is worth noting that Bacon, Peirce, and Robertson treat reasoning *ab initio* as a social process, even when it becomes an internal dialogue. When the end state sought is true belief, and the process proceeds as programmed, the product is science. How different from Descartes for whom reasoning is best seen in the internal monologue of the solitary thinker. Robertson uniquely has brought the tradition of social rationality into confrontation with our own internal commitments as we engage in this distinctive form of human interaction. In a manner perhaps unintended in the preparation of her essay, it does provide an excellent defense for the value of reason. As one puts her/himself into the various parables laid out here, one is disposed to ask: how would I like to see myself behaving in this conversation? What phenomenological stance best moves the participant along toward personal fulfillment, toward healthy growth in selfhood, in short, toward happiness? That, it seems to me, is the most compelling argument for caring about reason to be found in our President’s paper. It is thoroughly utilitarian; it is untainted by transcendentalism.

We conclude on a point where Robertson and I seem to have different linguistic intuitions. She quotes with approbation Andrew Oldenquist's comment on "dialogue with the competitor, the Spartan, or the andromedan," and she follows throughout her paper his conclusion: "it adds the possibility of being obligated to lose." But wait. Consider boxers, barristers, basketball players — all who engage in contests. Under what conditions is any one of them *obligated* to lose? Only when something goes seriously awry. One has accepted a bribe. One's beloved is held hostage. The andromedan proves old and feeble, mercy obliges one to hold back. Lacking such extraneous factors, a contestant faces, of course, the possibility of losing but never the obligation to lose.

At first I thought this matter merely one of linguistic preference, but I fear something deeper underlies it. To enter into a community of rational persuasion is to transcend winning and losing. One remembers moments — they occur in graduate seminars, in committee meetings, in political planning sessions, even in the PES — when the prophet's invitation, "Come, let us reason together," pervades the scene, when personal pride and privilege go by the board, when thought focuses on what is truly true in this argument.<sup>5</sup> What desires are for the good and how does one tell? What action would best achieve the goal we should be seeking? Never, of course, do other phenomenological stances disappear. Different ways of standing toward one's fellows flit like shadows of Gulf clouds across even the most sincere conversation, but at that moment when rational persuasion is operative, winning and losing change meaning. I have not lost but gained when, through rational persuasion, I lose a false belief and gain a true one, when I lose my desire for the base and gain in desire for the noble, when I join with others to act wittingly rather than willfully.

Once, long ago, a dominant movement in philosophy of education, especially in this Society, was called social reconstructionism. Its avowed goal: to create a form of public education from which would emerge generations of young citizens possessed of the knowledge and skill required for participation in a community of rational persuasion; individuals convinced by personal experience that public life can and should be conducted in that spirit. Such a glorious aspiration may now seem dim and distant, but Professor Robertson has demonstrated that careful thought and precise expression can always revive it.

---

1. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

2. Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. F.H. Anderson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

3. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1097-1098.

4. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (1877; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), vol. 5, 223-33.

5. *Isaiah* 1:18.