

Can Rationality Justify Itself?

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In the Winter 2000 issue of *Educational Theory*, Harvey Siegel and I, in separate essays, responded to an article by Jim Garrison.¹ Recently Siegel, in an extended reply to Garrison, endorses the argument made in my essay that (in his words) “the skeptic concerning rationality is in the end guilty of performative contradiction,” but then goes on to say that

Fennell’s subsequent discussion...of the authority of reasons I think conflates the question of *epistemic* authority — why are reasons forceful? — with that of (for lack of a better term) the *recognition* of that authority — how do we get individuals to recognise that good reasons are in fact epistemically forceful, and, insofar, to be heeded? My claims about the self-justifyingness of rationality address the former, not the latter, question, and so I respectfully disagree with Fennell’s charge that “rationality cannot justify itself” (p. 128): with respect to the latter question, Fennell is correct that it cannot, but with respect to the former question, if my arguments are successful, it can.²

I submit that Siegel’s arguments are, in fact, not successful and would like in this essay to indicate why. I will do this, first, by addressing the relevant arguments made by Siegel in his 1997 volume, *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal*. We will then examine a new defense of Siegel’s position, articulated by him early in 2002.

While Siegel is correct in asserting that the skeptical assault on rationality itself employs rationality, this conclusion does not entail that a person does yield to rationality, that is, accept its probative authority. One could, for example, simply pay it no mind, or regard it as a threat or an oddity. How, in contrast, does rationality become imperative? There are two aspects to the question: First, if a person rejects or distances himself from rationality, what strategy is available to establish its reign? Second, given that the sovereignty of rationality is not inherent, how is it initially established? In both instances, if we could appeal in the individual to the authority of rationality, the issue would not have arisen to begin with. We have here an educational problem of the first order.

THE ARGUMENTS IN *RATIONALITY REDEEMED?*

ARGUMENT ONE: RATIONALITY’S INABILITY TO JUSTIFY ITSELF UNDERMINES THE TEACHING OF RATIONALITY

In *Rationality Redeemed?* Siegel explicitly addresses the question of justifying rationality.³ His first argument is as follows: In our capacity as teachers of critical thinking we expect our students to be willing and able to provide reasons for what they believe and do. Precisely because our teaching is effective, students may ask for the reason for giving way to reasons, that is, for being rational.⁴ If we cannot answer — if we cannot justify rationality — we have undermined our lesson and students should reject it (*RR*, 77).

This conclusion is unnecessary. Do note that students must already accept the authority of rationality in order for them to make the challenge mentioned by Siegel, and for them subsequently to be disappointed. Siegel and I agree in observing that

the skeptical assault on rationality is guilty of performative contradiction and, as we shall see, the self-reflexivity of skepticism is at the heart of his defense of rationality. It is puzzling, therefore, that Siegel overlooks a kindred move that is available should students ask for reasons for being rational. That move consists of answering, "You should be rational because of who and what you are. You should be rational because you expect reasons, are disappointed when they are not provided, and refuse to accept conclusions that are not properly supported. How long is the meter bar in the Bureau of Standards?" We should then through words and practice consistently demonstrate our commitment to rationality, making clear our expectation that the students act accordingly. In short, the commitment to rationality (which must have been present for the students' challenge and potential disappointment to exist) provides the grounds for being rational. If this response fails to satisfy the questioner's appetite, let us examine the appetite. Ironically, by insisting that rationality employ reasons to justify itself (as opposed to referring to the commitment to be rational), we are liable, through disillusionment, to undermine the enterprise of rationality.

ARGUMENT TWO: THE SKEPTIC'S PERFORMATIVE CONTRADICTION ENTAILS THE SELF-JUSTIFICATION OF RATIONALITY

The primary argument offered in *Rationality Redeemed?* for the proposition that rationality is self-justifying is that any genuine and serious effort to show that it is not must itself employ rationality: "Rationality can thus be seen to be self-justifying, in that seriously querying the justificatory status of rationality presupposes that very status" (RR, 82). But this simply does not follow! That any serious questioning of the value or justification of rationality must be rational says something important about such questioning and its potential efficacy, but this discovery does not entail that rationality is self-justifying. (Imagine the absence of any such questioning. Where is the demonstration that rationality justifies itself?) At the heart of this matter is an ambiguity. To say that rationality can justify itself may mean (1) that it can successfully, that is, rationally, repel the skeptical assault, or (2) that it can offer an independent but non-circular demonstration that it (rationality) is rational. While Siegel and I are in concert that the first of these interpretations is true, this essay arises over our dispute regarding the second.

Understanding this distinction permits us to see that Siegel and I are in fact addressing very different educational problems. While he is concerned with skepticism (and properly so), I am engaged by the problem of agnosticism and anomie. Granted, much skepticism is careless, and it is often a tool of nihilism. As such, it is a worthy target. But to the degree it constitutes a genuine inquiry, skepticism is not a problem of the first rank, and Siegel has unleashed his mighty arsenal on the less important target. That is, Siegel is focused on students who are already in the tent, when our concern is even more appropriately given to those who, out of disillusionment, cynicism, fatigue, or simple lack of initiation, remain without.⁵ Siegel is correct in seeing that "seriously asking 'Why be rational?' presupposes a commitment to rationality" (RR, 85), but he remains inattentive to the nature and origins of that commitment and to its relevance to the central question before us. This commitment cannot be the product of rationality, because the product of rationality can have force only as a result of the commitment.

ARGUMENT THREE: POPPER IS WRONG IN DENYING THERE IS RATIONAL JUSTIFICATION FOR RATIONALITY

Siegel rejects the suggestion that rationality is based on unjustified commitment. The matter is addressed within an analysis of Karl Popper who, according to Siegel, alleges, “the commitment to rationality cannot be justified and rests instead on an irrational faith in reason” (*RR*, 78). Siegel cites Popper at length, and implies that Popper captures his (Siegel’s) position under the heading of “uncritical or comprehensive rationalism” (Popper’s term). On Popper’s view, comprehensive rationalism, insofar as it discards any view that cannot be rationally defended, is “logically untenable” and “inconsistent” (since it should constitute grounds for its own rejection). Popper offers the alternative of “critical rationalism which recognizes the fact that the fundamental rationalist attitude results from an (at least tentative) act of faith — from faith in reason” (*RR*, 78).⁶ Siegel then asks, “But is Popper correct that there can be no rational justification of rationality?” (*RR*, 79)

Siegel offers two responses to this question. First, he states that Popper does offer reasons for adopting critical rationalism (and hence, he does justify rationality). Siegel does not share these reasons with the reader. In a footnote, however, he cites *The Open Society and Its Enemies* and states, “Popper’s argument for critical rationalism focuses on the moral ramifications of opting for rationalism rather than irrationalism” (*RR*, 199, note 7).⁷ Siegel then reveals his hand by asking,

If it is possible rationally to defend critical rationalism, why should it not be possible to defend a comprehensive rationalism which does not admit a “priority of irrationalism,” as Popper’s more limited rationalism does? (*RR*, 79).

To the degree, however, that Siegel by asking this question would gain advantage over Popper, he is assuming that Popper’s defense of critical rationalism exempts itself from his (Popper’s) view that rationality is based on faith in reason. Only this assumption provides force to Siegel’s rhetorical strategy. But does Popper admit to such inconsistency? *Is* he inconsistent in giving reasons for critical rationality? Siegel does not show this. Indeed, why could Popper in response not simply say that Siegel and he both give reasons, but that he (Popper) is doing so in light of the truth that reason is based on faith, while Siegel stubbornly refuses to admit such when he gives *his* reasons?

But it is Siegel’s second response to Popper that he regards as the more significant. Here, again drawing on the theme of self-reflexivity, Siegel alleges that philosophical theories, like theories in other fields, are often self-reflexive, and necessarily so. To illustrate, Siegel uses the example of evolutionary theory: This theory:

can self-reflexively explain its own evolution: the theory contributes to its own explanation. But it does so without being inconsistent or engaging in viciously circular or question-begging reasoning (*RR*, 80).

Now, this is a particularly infelicitous illustration, insofar as a variety of commentators have demonstrated that although evolutionary theory can indeed account for its own advent, the theory cannot give us reason to believe in it. That is, evolutionary theory (a purely naturalistic account) provides no warrant to believe in evolutionary theory.⁸ Far, then, from the illustration supporting Siegel’s view that rationality is

self-reflexively justified, it suggests precisely the opposite. But, even if evolutionary theory succeeded in the way Siegel would like it to, that success would be irrelevant. This is because rationality possesses a uniquely significant status. If other theories are self-reflexively justified, this is because of an effective rational demonstration. Such argument works for these theories due to application of the external authority known as rational force. In contrast, rationality, in justifying itself, has no recourse to such external authority (except, if Popper is correct, to faith). Siegel's critique of Popper is also plagued by the problem noted above. Siegel says that rationality is able to use, and make legitimate reference to, self-reflexive justification. In stating this, Siegel means to say that rationality is self-justifying. He never shows this to be the case; he merely demonstrates that rationality is not vulnerable to any (rational) assault upon its value or use.

AN UNNECESSARY CONCESSION

At the close of his treatment of Popper, Siegel draws the following conclusion: "if it were not possible for an account of justification to apply self-reflexively to itself, there could be no theory of epistemic justification which was itself justified" (RR, 81). To the extent that this means that rationality cannot justify itself, this is precisely the case. But Siegel follows this insight with an additional, unwarranted assertion. He says, "this would constitute an argument, not merely for the irrationality of rationalism, but for wholesale scepticism, since no judgment concerning epistemic justification could be itself justified (RR, 81).

Here Siegel unnecessarily yields to the skeptic in two ways. First, as noted earlier, Siegel successfully demonstrates that the skeptical assault on rationality is an argument and therefore commits performative contradiction. If the skeptic launches an argument against rationality, he cannot win. Second, the assertion that rationality cannot justify itself (rendered above as the statement that justification cannot successfully "apply self-reflexively to itself") does not, in and of itself, "constitute an argument...for wholesale skepticism." To reach this conclusion one must subscribe to the view that anything short of a *comprehensive* rationalism is fatally flawed due to a lack of compelling foundation. But this is exactly to miss Popper's point: Rationality is authoritative and to be respected, but such authority and respect derives from a faith in reason and cannot be the product of rationality *per se*. If we do not assume the contrary, the skeptic receives no sustenance here.

A SECOND APPROACH TO THE QUESTION

RESPONSE TO SIEGEL'S STATEMENT

Returning now to the quotation with which we opened this essay, do note that the alleged conflation mentioned there by Siegel depends on a distinction between epistemic authority and recognition of that authority. In contrast, I suggest that a good reason is good when it is judged to be so by someone who understands and accepts a hierarchy of value. Because epistemic authority exists only in the lives of actual persons, good reasons, on this view, are "forceful" only for someone already appropriately initiated and thereby committed to such a hierarchy of value. Once we are initiated (and thereby oriented), there can and does exist epistemic authority. But there cannot be any such authority without a prior commitment. In its misconception

of the role of commitment, Siegel's argument for self-justification of rationality is blind to the conditions that permit it life. This is not necessarily a bad thing. But we ought not to believe Siegel's account constitutes the whole story — or the truth.

Siegel declares that there is both epistemic authority and the recognition of such authority. Since the problem from which I proceed is how to secure recognition of epistemic authority (probative force), Siegel and I are provisionally in agreement that there is something to be recognized. Our paths diverge, however, to the degree that I do not acknowledge the existence of probative force independent of some person or community's recognition of it. Consider in this regard three discoveries:

1. There is a tenth planet in our solar system
2. Jealousy and vengeance characterize the one true God
3. A particular sound argument possesses "force."

While it seems not at all strange to state that a planet existed prior to its discovery (indeed, it would be very odd to say that it did not), or even that God's true nature was concealed from us prior to revelation or the actions of a prophet, how peculiar it is to assert that the "force" of a sound argument existed prior to its discovery. This is because the force of sound arguments (of rationality) is fundamentally different from planets or deities. Because rationality itself provides the framework within which such forcefulness is possible, the forcefulness of rationality (epistemic authority) in principle cannot be "out there" prior to its recognition within that framework. Its existence is coincidental with that recognition!

In contrast to the account forwarded by Siegel, then, I suggest that the capacity and proclivity to recognize the authority of rationality is the outcome of a process of initiation or conversion. Any particular acknowledgement of sound argumentation may, and probably will, be experienced as a recognition, that is, as a ranking of that argument as an instance of forceful rationality. But such a recognition or ranking cannot occur for rationality itself. To the degree that rationality is forceful, it owes its power to another source. And so when I say that our problem as educators is to secure in students a recognition of the authority of rationality, I am speaking from the perspective of someone who has already been initiated.

Admittedly, this account, with its emphasis on the *recognition* of authority is all too easily employed as a lazy justification of subjectivism and relativism. But, agreeing with Popper that "these philosophies actually do accept reason, but are unable to use it properly," I believe we can stay clear of that.⁹ That our judgments are personal scarcely entails that they are subjective, or that all judgments are equally true.

SIEGEL'S REPLY: THE DIVINE COMMAND THEORY OF ETHICS

In response to my question of how epistemic authority, or any authority, can exist independent of recognition of that authority, Siegel invites us to consider the following possibility: Imagine that the Divine Command Theory of Ethics is correct, but that we all reside in a community of atheists. He then states, "In this case, God is the authority on ethical right and wrong, even though none of us recognize His authority. This seems to me a straightforward example of what you suggest is

impossible.”¹⁰ More positively, says Siegel, we can always be wrong regarding what (or whom) we judge to be authoritative. What is in fact authoritative is not determined by what (we choose to) regard as authoritative.

From this foundation, Siegel would then launch the knockout blows. To begin with, he states that his argument, like most arguments, is not obligated to take into account “the conditions that permit it life.” Moreover, he never claimed to tell “the whole story.” More centrally, the Divine Command Theory example demonstrates that good reasons can and will continue to exist even were we all to die (and no one is here to accept the hierarchy of value). I am therefore wrong in stating, “good reasons are ‘forceful’ only for someone already appropriately initiated and therefore (non-rationally) committed to such a hierarchy of value.” This is because, “Something’s being a good reason for something else is, in general, quite independent of anyone’s thinking that it is.”¹¹

EVALUATION OF THE COUNTEREXAMPLE

The counterexample of the Divine Command Theory of Ethics is neat and clean at first blush, but it stumbles and then falls flat as we force it to do real work. *Can* the Divine Theory be correct if no one recognizes the authority of God (or even His existence)? Imagine this is possible. What, then, do we have? What does “correct” mean here? Well, it surely does not mean “known to be correct,” since by hypothesis no one believes in God and therefore no one can know that the theory is correct. What can it mean, therefore, to say that the authority of God — that is, something unknown — “exists”? (Do note that such existence is required for the counterexample to do its job.) What is the meaning of “is” in the phrase “In this case God is the authority”? How does the reference to God and divine authority in the counterexample differ from reference to something imaginary? The price we would have to pay to affirm the meaningfulness of reference to an authority that cannot be known (to any of the actors in the relevant context) is that we would, in the name of consistency, have to accept the authority of an untold number of conceptions. This is too high a price to pay, not the least because it leaves the actor without guidance when guidance — legitimate authority — is precisely what is at issue.

The somewhat awkward reference here to “actors in the relevant context” is necessary because one suspects that Siegel wishes to remain in the status of observer (for whom unknown authorities “exist”). This perspective is a purely logical one. If we remain within this peculiar perspective, God can be authoritative even when no one believes in God. By the same token, however, *anything* can be authoritative — until one departs from this realm and enters the sort of context inhabited by actual persons. But when you do that, the counterexample no longer can do the work Siegel would have it do.

Let us get at this in another way while making a second point. The counterexample of Divine Command Theory has *prima facie* plausibility precisely because so many people actually do believe in God, or know of people who do. To illustrate, let us replace God in the Divine Command Theory counterexample with “Crxyi.” We have, then, a Crxyi Command Theory of Ethics that is correct, while there is no one

who believes in Crxyi. I suggest that Siegel would not offer the Crxyi Command Theory of Ethics as a counterexample to my position that the authority of reason depends on the recognition of that authority. This is because what makes the Divine Command Theory attractive for this purpose is precisely that so many people have in fact personally accepted the authority of God, and that those who do not believe in God have an understanding, or second-hand recognition, of what it means to do so. The very capacity of the Divine Command Theory to function in the counterexample depends on the prior recognition of God as an authority (that underlies a second-hand recognition), even though such authority may not be directly and personally accepted by us or even by all living persons at this time. In sum, (a) Siegel's unknown authority exists only within a perspective that is irrelevant to the real individuals with whom we are concerned, and (b) even the reference to this authority (within its odd realm) depends on prior recognition.

Siegel's position overlooks the distinction between (1) an entity or conception that we acknowledge to exist (and hence potentially exists as an authority), and (2) some entity or conception that has not earned even the status of a potential authority. In his counterexample Siegel depends on the first when my point follows from the second. That is, when rationality is not presupposed, it cannot be justified, since justification depends on the authority of rationality. That authority is not, and cannot be, the product of rationality.

The counterexample fails for another reason as well: For us to suppose the correctness of an ethical theory (or the existence of God) that no one acknowledges is quite different from supposing the authority of rationality that no one acknowledges. In the first case, it is still possible to carry on (in this instance, carry on in the discussion and intelligent practice of ethics). But in the latter, what can we do? If the authority of rationality is not recognized, what could moral discourse amount to?

To sum up: The Divine Command Theory counterexample does not establish that authority exists independently of recognition of that authority. The distinction between epistemic authority and recognition of that authority remains suspect, because probative force is a variety of persuasive force. We have no reason to believe that rationality can justify itself.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Siegel is of course correct in observing that we can be wrong about what we judge to be authoritative. But in saying this he forgets that something must be a candidate for authority before we can be right or wrong in accepting it. For rationality to be such a candidate was made possible through something other than the operation of rationality *per se*. It is also worth noting that when Siegel states that what is in fact authoritative is not determined by what (we choose to) regard as authoritative, he is trading upon a false dilemma. There is a third possibility in addition to (a) authority without recognition, and (b) subjectivism. That third alternative is authority as understood by situated human actors in the light of the available criteria. When such persons are acting seriously and with integrity, authority, while a matter of recognition, is not "chosen," nor is it subjective or arbitrary. These are the circumstances within which rationality can and does exist.

There is, moreover, something peculiar about the authority of rationality. We cannot be wrong about *it*, since rationality must already have its authority in order for us to be wrong (or right). Commitment to fallibility is indeed a worthy thing. But it owes its cogency to the very thing that is at issue — the authority of rationality. There is, in other words, one authority that is neither fallible nor infallible. That authority must exist in order for fallibility to exist. The name of that authority is rationality. This is why initiation into the authority of rationality is so important!

We are now in a position to understand why, as noted earlier, it is not necessarily a bad thing that teachers and students be blind to the conditions that permit rationality and probative force life. Asking whether rationality can be justified is like a centipede counting its legs as it walks along a branch. It is likely to stumble and fall. Not every question that can be raised should be.

But philosophers are beyond redemption. Siegel would have students ask, “Why be rational?” and I paradoxically find myself sustaining the question by denying that rationality justifies itself. Precisely, however, because of where we have tread, Siegel is incorrect in stating that he is not obligated to take into account the conditions that give his arguments life. That would not normally be the case, but what makes it possible for rationality to have force is the very question responsible for our being here today! True, neither Siegel nor anyone else is obligated to tell “the whole story,” but we *are* required to tell enough of it to treat the question responsible for this exchange. Alternatively, of course, we might simply have remained silent.

There is, finally, also a practical objection to Siegel’s view that rationality can justify itself. For the sake of argument let us admit that rationality’s rationality “exists” independent of any recognition of it. Now what? This existence has no possible role as we deal with the problem that gave rise to these deliberations. That problem consists of ensuring that people are able *and willing* to submit to the authority of rationality — that they will elect voluntarily to justify their actions, respect reasons, and so on. The assertion that rationality is rational (independent of any recognition of the authority of rationality) can do nothing to assist us in addressing this problem. It does not help the teacher produce a being that respects rationality. What could the statement that rationality is authoritative because it is rational mean to the individual who is our concern? If such a student were capable of understanding (not to mention acknowledging the cogency of) this assertion, we would not be concerned with him to begin with!

The authority of rationality cannot be a tool for establishing the authority of rationality because the forcefulness of reasons exists only for persons who have been successfully initiated into the domain of reason — who have, that is, *become* rational. Rationality cannot justify itself.¹²

1. Harvey Siegel, “Afterwords,” *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 129-31; Jon Fennell, “Afterwords,” *Educational Theory* 50, no. 1 (2000): 127-29.

2. Harvey Siegel, “Dangerous Dualisms or Murky Monism? A Reply to Jim Garrison,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 4 (November, 2001): 594 (note 11).

3. Harvey Siegel, *Rationality Redeemed? Further Dialogues on an Educational Ideal* (New York: Routledge, 1997). The discussion occurs within the chapter entitled, "Why Be Rational? Justifying the Commitment to Rationality." For all subsequent references this book will be cited as *RR*.

4. Siegel here makes no distinction between rationality and critical thinking: Failure to justify rationality constitutes an inconsistency in the teaching of critical thinking. Robert Ennis, in his own response to Siegel, insists that there is an important difference between the two. See "The Rationality of Rationality: Why Think Critically?" *Philosophy of Education 1989*, ed. Ralph Page (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1990), 402-5.

5. To his credit, Siegel does at last show awareness of those who are "uninterested." But this occurs in the epilogue to the book (*RR*, 188). He does not connect the question of the justification of rationality with interest or disposition, even while he recognizes that only persons of appropriate interest and disposition can be influenced by him (*RR*, 186).

6. Siegel is here quoting Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 231.

7. More specifically, Popper focuses on the "consequences" of being rational, but it is somewhat misleading to declare that Popper's position rests upon an argument (Popper, *The Open Society*, 232-33). For Popper, being rational "is a moral decision" and, while "arguments cannot *determine* such a fundamental moral decision...this does not imply that our choice cannot be *helped* by any kind of argument whatever." He then adds, "a rational analysis of the consequences of a decision does not make the decision rational; the consequences do not determine our decision; it is always we who decide."

8. See, for example: C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 20-35; Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 133-43; and Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216-37.

9. Popper, *The Open Society*, 381.

10. Personal communication.

11. Personal communication.

12. This essay benefited from comments by Tim Simpson and Robert Ennis.