

Can Reasons for Rationality Be Redeemed?

Harvey Siegel
University of Miami

Hanan Alexander pays me the compliment of taking some of my arguments seriously enough to criticize them; for that I am grateful. In what follows I pose five questions, which I hope will shed some light on the merits of Alexander's criticisms, claims and arguments.

Alexander argues that my attempt to establish rationality as an ideal which can be justified independently of his preferred social vision — a vision that I also endorse, which values the societal promotion of conceptions of moral personhood and the possibility of moral discourse guided by reasons — fails, because it cannot meet either “the ideology objection” or “the indoctrination objection.” My attempts to deflect these objections fail, he claims, because each of these objections “calls for a justification of rationality that would be acceptable to those who do not otherwise care about reasons,” and my attempts do not provide such a justification.

I respectfully disagree. But rather than argue the case directly, I will instead pose five questions to Alexander, indicating how I think his answers would reflect upon the cogency of both his position and my own.

1. If “the determinist does not care to join the issue with the rationalist,” how can she regard the rationalist as mistaken? But if she does not regard the rationalist as mistaken, in what sense can she have joined the issue dividing the rationalist and her determinist opponent? In what sense are they engaged in a philosophical dispute?

A fundamental difficulty with Alexander's arguments is that his characterization of the proponents of the ideology and indoctrination objections is not coherent, since those proponents cannot *both* “call for a justification” of rationality, and yet *not* “care about reasons.” In so characterizing them, Alexander tries to allow his protagonists to have things in both of two incompatible ways. But they cannot.

On my view, rationality is self-justifying — *simpliciter*, that is, without reference to particular people — in that *serious* rejection of it requires its acceptance. By “serious” I mean rejection *as wrong*, or as inferior to its rivals. Rejecting rationality in *this* sense requires its prior acceptance, and so this sort of rejection is impossible. Of course it is possible to reject rationality “non-seriously,” and it is this possibility that Alexander emphasizes:

the determinist is out to establish neither the rightness of her view nor the wrongness of Siegel's, since she has in fact rejected the very utility and appropriateness of such categories as right and wrong.

Alexander suggests here that since she rejects the very idea of rightness, the determinist will not be convinced by the rationalist's arguments for the rightness of the rationalist's position. On this point he is surely right: if the determinist denies to reasons any epistemic power or probative force, then she will of course be unimpressed by the power or force of such reasons. But why should this bother the

rationalist? It should not, for the simple reason that this position fails to engage the relevant philosophical issue. One cannot engage it without rejecting determinism. Hence my first question.

The point can be put in the form of a choice: which of the following theses characterizes Alexander's determinist?

- (1) The determinist disagrees philosophically (and so on the basis of reasons) with the rationalist's contention concerning the epistemic forcefulness of reasons, or
- (2) The determinist rejects, but not on the basis of reasons, the epistemic forcefulness of reasons.

The determinist cannot embrace both (1) and (2), on pain of contradiction. If she embraces (1), she accepts the epistemic forcefulness of reasons, and so, despite herself, embraces the key contention of rationalism. If she embraces (2), then the rationalist need not be bothered by the determinist's position, since her claim in no way challenges the rationalist's position. The first question to Alexander, then, can be reformulated as:

2. *Which of these theses does your determinist embrace and how does she (do you) respond to the difficulty with each just noted?*

A further problem is that Alexander's discussion systematically conflates *persuasive* force and *epistemic* or *probative* force (as does the passage Alexander cites from Ennis). He is surely right that the rationalist's arguments will not convince the determinist in the sense of *changing her mind*, since her official stance is that minds are not to be changed on the basis of reasons. But the issue does not concern persuasive or rhetorical power. The philosophical question which divides the rationalist and the determinist is not: "Can the rationalist convince, that is, persuade someone who doesn't care about reasons to care?" The question that divides them is rather: "Given that there is a genuine philosophical disagreement between them, can either one of them offer reasons for thinking that her position is philosophically preferable to her opponent's position?" In answering *this* question, remarks concerning persuasive power will be irrelevant. Once the conflation of persuasive power and evidential support, masked by Alexander's use of the word "convince," is uncovered, the paucity of his argument is revealed as well. For what it shows is that the rationalist's position may be lacking in persuasive power, a point the rationalist can happily grant; it fails even to address the probative strength of that position. So my next question:

3. *When Alexander writes that "if the determinist does not care to join the issue with the rationalist, there is nothing of a rational nature that the latter can do to convince her to do so," does he mean that the rationalist cannot "convince," that is, persuade the determinist to embrace rationalism; or does he mean that the rationalist cannot "convince," that is, provide reasons which probatively support her position?*

I suggest that neither of these options will help: if Alexander embraces the former, his claim is correct but irrelevant to the dispute between the rationalist and the determinist; if he embraces the latter, then his argument fails, since, by his own

admission, all it shows is that the determinist can refuse to be persuaded by the rationalist's argument. It does not, on this option, even begin to show that the rationalist's position is not supported by the arguments advanced on its behalf. That is, Alexander's argument establishes that the determinist will find the rationalist's argument rhetorically unpersuasive, and takes that to be tantamount to establishing that that argument is probatively unconvincing. But these are obviously different; Alexander's argument for the first has no tendency to establish the second. It is this shift which is masked by Alexander's reliance on the equivocal expression "convince."

I want to pose two further questions, which I haven't the space to develop. So I will just blurt them out, and hope that the reader can work out their relevance to Alexander's paper:

4. Why regard dogmatism as applying to doctrines rather than persons, and why regard it as a function of success/failure?

5. If the cultivation of "moral personhood" is the preeminent educational ideal, and rationality/critical thinking the means to achieving that ideal rather than the ideal itself, how are disputes concerning the content of the ideal resolved, or the ideal itself established? Why value the cultivation of moral personhood, or any particular conception of it?

To conclude, I applaud Alexander's embrace of "pragmatic rationalism" and his rejection of both "dogmatic rationalism" and "dogmatic idealism," and I happily endorse his liberal vision of rational discourse/learning communities which strive to resolve their disputes rationally, to raise their children so as to cultivate moral personhood, and to value and honor the Kantian injunction to treat all people with respect as persons. In noting that we agree on all this, it should be clear that on most of the main points at issue we are at one. The key point on which we disagree is that concerning "the paradox of rationality," and here I hope to have shown that Alexander's misgivings concerning my attempts to justify rationality are easily answered, and the objections to that ideal readily dispatched. The determinist can be, and indeed has been, answered. But of course I realize that Alexander will likely not be "convinced," that is, persuaded, by my remarks; and I look forward to his answers to the questions I have posed.