*Teaching Ethics*

doi: 10.5840/tej201410299

Selling “The Reason Game”

*Susan T. Gardner*

*Capilano University*

Abstract: Please provide an abstract of 100–150 words.

t its best, or perhaps even in its only authentic sense, reasoning is such that all engaged participants must be prepared to follow reasons *wherever* they

A

lead (Gardner), that they assume that there are norms that govern what each should believe (Darwall 2006: 50–56), that “how speakers and hearers make use of their communicative freedom to take “yes” or “no” positions is not a matter of their sub- jective discretion (Habermas 2008: 10), that the reasoning that transpires between rational beings is such that it “is in no way based on feelings, impulses, and incli- nations,” (Kant 1964: 100). At its best, then, or, again, perhaps only in its authentic sense, participants who reason together must assume that the conclusion that they come to, or at least ought to come to, is not “up to them,” and, because it is not “up to them,” they all ought to enter the reasoning game prepared, from the outset, to change their minds when confronted with stronger competing arguments.

To suggest that one ought to enter the reasoning game prepared to change one’s mind seems obvious and laudable—*in theory*. In practice, however, in those instances when one is confronted with “pseudo-reasoning” in which it never seems to cross one’s “opponent’s” mind to alter his or her original position, it is not at all clear why one ought not to respond in like manner. Or, even more challenging, it is not at all clear, in situations in which there is an opportunity to enhance one’s sta- tus, or avoid ego-damage, or successfully divert blame, why anyone ought to cave to the opposition merely in deference to the abstract goals of reason.

Thus, for instance, if Veronica maintains her bully status by informing Betty that she must avoid ever associating with Archie because, it is evident (is it not?) that his pimply face is *really* disgusting, how do we convince Veronica and/or Betty that they should care that Veronica’s reasoning is defective, and how do we arm Archie against the pain of its onslaught?

What is particularly intriguing about the above scenario is that the strength of Veronica’s position, both in her own eyes and those of others, is grounded in the fact that she has given a reason for her position, and as such, because she has given that reason confidently, and because her “reasoning” has hitherto been successful in recruiting followers, her position has been mightily fortified by being judged

©*Teaching Ethics* 2014. All rights reserved; ISSN 1544-4031. Online First:

as reasonable. Being reasonable, after all, is the highest goal toward which we humans can aspire.

Veronica’s position is, of course, not “reasonable.” It is “fake-reasonable.” Ve- ronica is a fraud, and it is to her own and our combined well-being that she be called on it—or, at least, this is the case that will be made in what is to follow. Specifically, it will be argued that it is imperative that we arm ourselves, and oth- ers (particularly our youngsters) (1) with the *ability* to recognize the difference between genuine and pseudo-reasoning, (2) with the *motivation* to maintain an unbending commitment to follow the “impersonal” “norm-driven” rules of reason even in situations in which “non-reasonable” strategies appear to support short- term bests interests, and (3) with the *confidence* that genuine reasoning is the best defense against the fake stuff.

In short, it is imperative that we learn how to sell the “reason game.” Let us take these three points in turn.

Recognizing the Difference between

Genuine and Fake Reasoning

We all know that disastrous consequences can result if fake steel is used when building a bridge, or if fake antibiotics are given to seriously ill patients. In China, recently, a number of deaths resulted when fake baby formula became widely dis- tributed. In light of all of this, what is extraordinary is that we humans, who dis- tinguish ourselves from other animals primarily on the strength of our ability to reason, have utterly failed to make any serious effort to root out the fake stuff, i.e., to equip ourselves in recognizing the difference between fake-reasoning and the genuine sort that indeed deserves deference.

So what are the basic logical moves that epitomize genuine reasoning? The following are the two most obvious.

The first, often referred to as a test for “local sufficiency” (Gardner), demands that we subject the reason what we or anyone else provide in support of a posi- tion (along with the hidden premise that comes with it) to the possibility of being falsified by counterexample. This is very similar to Kant’s universalizability rule. Thus, if Veronica says that Archie is justifiably ostracized because of the pimples on his face, because she must accept the hidden premise that *anyone* who has face pimples is justifiably ostracized, she must be prepared to accept that anyone, including her beloved mother, sister, brother, her favorite athlete, or even the Presi- dent on the United States, must likewise be ostracized should pimples suddenly emerge on their faces.1

Testing for local sufficiency or universalizability, however (and despite an abiding reverence for Kant), is not enough. Even if a position passes such a test, even if Veronica maintains that she would indeed be prepared to abandon her be-

loved mother should she develop face pimples (what Hare refers to as a “fanatic,” Hare 1965: 157–185), Veronica must still then be prepared to have her position compete for the prize of “globally sufficient” (Gardner) by comparing the merits of her position against the merits of the strongest possible opposition.2 In this case, the opposition might be that Archie ought not to be ostracized because he is a very kind and hence a lovely person to have as a friend, and would be seriously harmed by wholesale rejection. Skills learned in critical thinking classes can do much to maximize the efficiency by which a reasoner can judge which is the least weak of two competing positions. For present purposes, what is important to note is that this estimation is a function of the logic, not wishful thinking, i.e., that the winner is one that would be deemed as such behind a veil of ignorance (Rawls), i.e., as the one that any and all rational persons would accept given the evidence and reasons both for and against the initial position.

Given these two basic logical moves of testing for local and global sufficiency, we can deduce specific markers that can be used to differentiate genuine as op- posed to pseudo-reasoning. Thus, we can recognize the presence of pseudo-rea- soning as looking and feeling like a situation in which: (1) One first decides what the conclusion is or wants it to be, i.e., one appears absolutely committed from the outset, (2) one scrambles around in one’s imagination for reasons *only* in support of it, (3) one remains oblivious to the fact that one’s reasons may be vulnerable to counterexample or that one is unable to universalize one’s position, (4) one listens to the opposing arguments, if at all, *only* to refute, (5) one fails to genuinely engage the reasons offered by the opposition, and (6) the primary goal throughout the “interchange” is the defence of the original position. This picture contrasts with an authentic reasoner (1) who approaches the issue with genuine wonder or inquiry, i.e., while the conclusion may be intuited, it nonetheless remains tentative, (2) who scrambles around in her imagination for reasons both in support and against the original position, (3) who takes counterexamples seriously and rethinks in light of an inability to universalize, (4) who exhibits genuine listening by paraphrasing the strongest arguments of those who disagree, (5) who engages the position of the opposition by either honouring or outing according to its merits, and (6) whose primary goal throughout is “truth,” i.e., the ferreting out of the least weak position.

If you are in the middle of accepting large amounts of cash that, if counterfeit, could have life-changing consequences, you need, at hand, a quick and reliable test for ensuring that you have the real deal. In Canada, if you put paper money up against a light source, the lack of a water mark that mimics the visible face on the bill should ring alarm bells. Likewise, if anything at all is riding on the conclusion, alarm bells ought to be clanging when you are exposed to argumentation that either lacks the markers of genuine reasoning or exhibits the markers of the fake stuff (see Figure 1 below).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Genuine reasoning** | **Fake reasoning** |
| **1. Initial approach** | Inquiry; wonder | Conviction |
| **2. Valence of reasons** | Muses over reasons both in support and against positions | Offers reasons only in support of a position |
| **3. Evaluation of own reasons** | Takes counterexamples seriously;  reveres universalizability | Concrete thinking; believes reasons can apply according to subjective discretion |
| **4. Listening skills** | Paraphrases opposition’s strongest points | Listens only to refute |
| **5. Dealing with the opposition** | Honours or outs the opposition according to its merits | Fails to legitimately engage opposition |
| **6. Motivation** | Truth | Power |

**Figure 1**

But Why Embrace Normative Reasoning against

One’s Short-Term Best Interests?

Veronica is queen of all she surveys precisely because of the power of her pseudo- reasoning (bolstered perhaps by her good looks and family wealth). How then might we convince her to change tactics and, instead, utilise the real deal? This question is one at the heart of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic: how can we convince the master, particularly if he accrues enormous benefits from being the master, to change his ways?

In his book *Morality and Modernity*, Ross Poole notes that though the mas- ter may be the master of external trappings, he is not the master over one of the most central elements of his life, namely his identity (Poole 1991: 143). This is so because identities are not “up to us” but are, rather, a function of evaluative de- scriptives that get glued to our behaviours most firmly when shot from the author- ity of what is perceived as an objectively neutral, i.e., rational, source. Jean-Paul Sartre poignantly portrays the agonies of this identity-interdependence in a scene in his play “No Exit” in which one of the protagonists, Garcin, is unable to take advantage of the opportunity to “exit” from what is depicted as the hellish human struggle to anchor evaluative descriptives because one of the remaining protago- nists, Inez, the one who seems to be the most objective with regard to her evalua- tions, remains firm in her unfavorable depiction of one of his past actions. “It’s you whom I have to convince,” says Garcin (Sartre 2001: 83).

Though “masters” in real life may rarely be directly confronted with unfavour- able evaluations, the point nonetheless is this: that precisely because the master is the master, his identity cannot be conferred by an independent free rational, hence authoritative, agent, and, therefore, the master’s identity must continuously rely on changing unstable external signals, most notably the trappings of power. The master’s identity, in other words, is inherently insecure.

That being said, it would nonetheless be ludicrously naïve to believe that ty- rants can be reasoned out of ways that are “externally” successful. As long as bul- lies are in power, and believe that this will be forever thus, they will be bemused by the suggestion that they should worry about the reverse role universalization game of considering whether they would consent to be bullied should they find themselves in their victims’ shoes. Veronica has never had pimples, nor have any of her family or friends, so why should she care about this silly imagination game?

But what about Betty? At first contact with Veronica, Betty is vulnerable be- cause she has little faith in her own capacity to reason, and that, combined with Veronica’s confidence, along with Betty’s inability to tell the difference between genuine reasoning and the fake stuff, makes her a perfect candidate for becoming a bully-enabler. However, this need not be the case. If Betty is empowered with the capacity to at least discern the primary characteristics of fraudulent thinking, she will be able to detect that what is coming out of Veronica’s mouth is not genuine reasoning. Betty will be able to figure out that, though Veronica uses reason’s trig- ger words like “because,” all that Veronica is doing is advocating her own personal vision dressed up in the royal cloak of reason. And as blind followers of tyrants have learned throughout history, usually to their peril, Betty ought to surmise that idiosyncratic (as opposed to reasoned) visions are highly fickle and often predic- tive, ironically, of a universalizing tendency; if Veronica celebrates the victimiza- tion of Archie because it is to her benefit, victimizing Betty will do just as well should circumstances change. But even more important is the fact that, through recognizing the absence of genuine reasoning, Betty will come to find Veronica’s persuasive strategies abhorrent. This is so because all “reasoning beings” experi- ence orders backed only by a personal “unreasoned” directives as inherently insult- ing; this is a threat to their status as members of the human race. For followers to become and remain comfortable in their positions, they need to be persuaded by propaganda; they need to buy into what looks like a “reason”-backed ideology; they need to believe that they have the dignity of following reason’s call. If the ideology bubble is pricked by the blade that distinguishes genuine from pseudo- reasoning, the temptation to follow the other’s lead will likewise deflate. In other words, Betty needs the prism through which she will be able to see that the em- press has no clothes.

Having Confidence that Reason Is the Best Defense

against Pseudo-Reasoning

Archie’s predicament may be more grave than Betty’s. Archie may, quite literally, be in physical danger. Assuming such dire issues are dealt with directly, a mandate nonetheless remains for empowering Archie in a deeper, richer sense. Archie needs to know that, because Veronica’s reasoning is counterfeit, she lacks the credentials

to even participate in, let alone direct, the dialogue that will ultimately decide who it is that he is becoming. Archie needs to know that if he wants the security of being “master” of his own ship (and a slave to no one), then he (irrespective of what Veronica does) needs to learn how to harness reasoning of the genuine sort. He needs to know that autonomy is not an easy buy; that it is not purchased on the other side of a squabble or even after winning a long-term brawl. Archie needs to know that he must always be prepared to energetically engage in the sort of rea- soning that will power action for which he will enthusiastically take responsibility, and which will, therefore, anchor his long-term identity. It is only through genuine interpersonal opposition-seeking reasoning of this sort, that ultimately, Archie can become his own person.

Selling the “Reason Game”

An economy in tatters is a breeding ground for misery and social strife. It is, thus, ethically imperative that governments ensure that educational forces focus on maximizing the economic productivity of its citizens. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that in their earnest efforts to create citizens who are commercially vi- able, educators, guided by government policy, have all but abandoned the effort to educate persons as “persons” in the important sense of being capable of reasoning their way to the steering wheel of their own life’s journey.

Though side-bar programs of the “personhood sort” are occasionally intro- duced in the wake of alarming extra-curricular interpersonal violence (e.g., roots of empathy), the very fact that these interventions are “side-bars,” reinforces the message that, even from educators’ points of view, i.e., “those in the know,” rea- son is not something that is central to ordinary everyday life. In Dewey’s words, “Pupils are taught to live in two separate worlds, one the world of out-of-school experience, the other the world of books and lessons” (Dewey 2007: 26).

Failure to “sell the reason game” as a skill/motivational set that is necessary for taking charge of one’s own personhood, however, is not the worst of it. Since we humans are fundamentally reasoning beings, we will reason no matter what—if not using the real stuff, then using the fraudulent sort that is easily at hand. Referring again to Dewey, if habits of deep genuine reflection are not cultivated, then what will develop are “habits of hasty, heedless, impatient glancing over the surface; if not habits of consecutively following up the suggestions that occur, then habits of haphazard, grasshopper-like guessing; if not habits of suspended judgment till inferences have been tested by the examination of evidence, then habits of credu- lity alternating with flippant incredulity, belief or unbelief being based, in either case, upon whim, emotion, or accidental circumstance”(Dewey 2007: 34–35). As a consequence, attitudes, opinions, and actions that “are not guided by thoughtful

conclusions, . . . are (instead) guided by inconsiderate impulse, unbalanced appe- tite, caprice, or the circumstances of the moment” (Dewey 2007: 35).

What ought we to do, then, in the face this tsunami of pseudo-reasoners com- ing down the pipeline? How do we prevent Veronica (and her ilk) from seizing the reins of power? The most efficient first defence is to ensure that potential followers and victims can easily recognize that the currency in which she and other pseudo- reasoners deal is counterfeit. Thereafter, we need to immerse all comers in the ad- vantages of being able to play the reason game well. And if we adopt a multi-level marketing scheme, so that we sell the reason game to educators with the proviso that they sell it to their students, with the proviso that they, in turn, sell it to their family, friends and future children, with the proviso that they too pass it on, we will end with a world so inundated by reasonable people that those like Veronica (ironically to their own long-term best interests) will find little place to take root.

We modern humans are brilliant at successfully marketing stuff that absolutely no one needs and much of what no one really even wants. So we can do this. And we must do this. The fraud that has been going on right before our eyes has been going on for far too long, much to individual and collective harm. It is time that we thoroughly root it out by launching a massive campaign to sell the “reason game.”

Notes

1. This is so because a reason only becomes a reason in a valid deductive argument. If I tell you that “A is O” because ”A is P,” the only way that makes any sense is if I also add that “All P is O” (where A stands for “Archie,” O stands for “justifiably ostracized,” and P is “someone who has pimples”).

2. Anyone participating in argumentation shows his rationality *or lack of* it by the manner in which he handles and responds to the offering of reasons for or against claims. If he is “open to argument,” he will either acknowledge the force of those reasons or seek to reply to them, either way he will deal with them in a “rational” manner. If he is “deaf to argu- ment,” by contrast, he may either ignore contrary reasons or reply to them with dogmatic assertions, and either way he fails to deal with the issues rationally (Habermas 1992: 18; emphasis added).

References

Darwall, Stephan. 2006. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Account- ability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dewey, John. 2007. *How We Think*. Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Pub.

Gardner, Susan T. 2009. *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*. Philadelphia: Temple University

Press.

Habermas, J. 1992. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1: *Reason and the Ratio- nalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press. (German text 1981.)

. 2008. *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity Press. (German text

2001.)

Hare, R. M. 1965. *Freedom and Reason*. New York: Oxford University Press.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/019881092X.001.0001>

Kant, Immanuel. 1964. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton. New

York: Harper and Row.

Poole, Ross. 1991. *Morality and Modernity*. London: Routledge.<http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203168936>

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. London: Oxford University Press.

Sartre. Jean-Paul. 2001. “No Exit,” in *Existential Literature: An Introduction*, ed. Linda E.

Patrik. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth.