Being Reasonable

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The time has come for feminist philosophers to forgive rationality its past transgressions and to formulate a positive account of the concept.[1] Cartesian conceptions of rationality to which feminists most strongly object are no longer tenable. Instead, we should consider the possibility that reason is a virtue concept which not only allows for flexibility and responsiveness to context but also fulfills feminists' demands for diversity and variation in our understanding of reason. And it does this without opening the door to a radical relativism. In short, virtue rationality walks the same tightrope as feminism, that between subjectivity and objectivity, or between inclusion and normativity.

Despite having a laundry list of criticisms against reason, many feminists also defend the concept.[2] What few have done, however, is engage in formulating a positive theory of rationality. But why should we do this? In a sweeping assessment of our need for the concept, Emily Robertson says:

> to abandon the regulative idea of rationality would require either rejection of the goals of rationality (truth, strategic success of action, a good life, etc.) or extreme skepticism about the claims of any forms of judgment (and traditions of reason) to be better ways of reaching these goals. (1995, p. 120)

That giving up on rationality requires us to either give up on truth or to embrace extreme skepticism is well understood within feminist circles. While many feminists accept that all is not well with "truth" and "knowledge," we still need them. To give just two quick bits of evidence, Louise Antony (2002, p. 115) says: "I do believe in truth, and I have *never* understood why people concerned with justice have given it such a bad rap." And Lorraine Code (1993, p. 41) claims: "feminists cannot opt for a skepticism that would make it impossible to know that certain practices and institutions are wrong and likely to remain so." The "truth" of feminism, as well as its claims concerning justice, requires some commitment to truth. If we are to criticize oppressive structures and practices, we require some means of establishing the wrongness of these structures and practices. That is, for feminists to be right, they need normativity—and

normativity requires rationality.

When it comes to Cartesian rationality, feminists have had much to critique, including its pretensions to:

- accessing an objective structure of reality
- universality (i.e., that it is the same faculty for everyone)
- epistemic individualism
- acting as *the* primary human faculty for gaining knowledge (as opposed to body or emotion).

In opposition, feminists insist that there is more to reason than simply transcendent structures and internally focused methodologies. Instead,

- We always know the world from *some* perspective and, thus, have no access to objective structures.
- The faculties of reason and sensation are influenced (if not entirely determined) by one's culture and one's body.
- Humans gain knowledge through communally held standards.
- Bodies are essential to (if not the primary source of) acquiring knowledge.

In short, we need a rationality that is sensitive to context and that allows a diversity of perspectives; it must also allow us to evaluate perspectives against one another. As Rita Felski (1997, p. 17) reminds us, we cannot assume that "all differences are necessarily benevolent and hence deserve recognition."

Evident in much feminist thinking is a back and forth tension between our contingent, empirical histories and some structural capacity for ordering these within coherent frameworks that can support normativity. One account of rationality that can help navigate this tension is the view of rationality as a virtue concept. This account emphasizes perspectivalism and the social embeddedness of rationality. What most strongly distinguishes this view from more traditional forms of rationality is its lack of rules and procedures for defining what is rational. Although rationality requires a fit between experience and belief, there are no set standards for how to achieve this fit—that is, no standard other than how the rational person actually does it. Of course, rational persons do not simply make up what it is to be rational any more than morally virtuous persons make up what it is to be moral. Rather, because rationality entails a responsiveness to the environment, including one's social environment, rational persons determine the appropriateness of belief and action by the types of experi-

ences they have and, thus, the types of grounds available for justifying their beliefs.

On this account, we find an emphasis on the pluralistic practice and activity of *reasoning*. Instead of emphasizing the justification of individual beliefs, virtue rationality captures a holistic notion of an overall rationality in which "a suitable proportion of... [one's] beliefs, desires, and action tendencies—*including those rooted in emotion*—are individually rational and significantly connected with one another" (Audi, 2001, pp. 225-226; italics added). This makes a decisive break with the Cartesian dependence upon methodology. According to Robert Audi, a proponent of this sort of account,

> An adequate theory of rationality must do justice both to the variability that marks different ranges of experience and diverse cultural settings and to the constancies that, because of important elements in our humanity, can be expected as recurring elements, at least in any civilized society. (2001, p. 9)

This view replaces Descartes' inverted pyramid with the image of a tree which pulls its nutrients from the soil and transmits these to various branches and leaves.[3] The idea is that our epistemic foundations and the superstructure built upon those foundations can vary indefinitely. Because foundations are flexible and allow for differing structures to be built upon them, there are no specific beliefs or desires that a rational person must have. While I can be justified in believing one thing, another person may be justified in believing something entirely different. Not all rational people need believe the same things. Despite such relativity to grounds, virtue rationality still manages to assent to standards that are stable and cross-culturally valid. After all, rational persons, as rational, must respond to their experiences by acquiring certain attitudes appropriately grounded in these experiences (see Audi, 2001, pp. 171, 174, 206). Experience will not support just any attitude.

The limits of what is rational to believe or desire may be given by features of experience with which the rational person must cope, but a great many features of our environment are stable and elicit similar responses across cultures. There are, in other words, boundaries to the possibilities for human life and the ways in which it can flourish. These provide a constraint on how we can *rationally* cope with experience. The structuring of experience is not without purpose; rather, it is designed to help us understand and interact with the world. We can also take some guidance from how it is we tend to view everyday reason. Insofar as our responses

to our experiences are conducive to the goal of human flourishing, then, we are rational, and the more we flourish, the more rational we are. Of course, what we mean by "human flourishing" matters greatly, and there are clearly different ways of defining the term. Yet, there are significant similarities in all conceptions of human flourishing, including the ability to adequately sustain one's life, care for one's children, gain the respect of others, and so on. Being human means that we tend to have generally similar goals and aspirations, although the context of society and culture will alter the expression of these greatly.

Clearly, there is some affinity between features of virtue rationality and features that feminists insist must be part of any discussion of rationality. Yet one can ask how well such a conception of rationality really fits with feminism and its goals. The work of Rebecca Kukla and Nicholas Burbles helps answer this question. Both Kukla and Burbles address the question by largely assuming a notion of virtue and then following through on what that means for feminist thought. Kukla does this with respect to the concept of "second nature," and Burbles argues for a notion of "reasonableness" that further refines the broader conception of rationality as a virtue concept.

Second nature builds on the Aristotelian account of virtue as something acquired through cultivation. Yet, this acquisition lacks a set of rules or principles. One must *learn* to see which reasons matter to this deliberation about "rightness" and which ones do not. The relevance of reasons to our rational evaluations depends upon one's perspective and one's community rather than upon some universally transcendent rules of rationality. But in the absence of such rules can second nature resolve questions concerning how we determine what beliefs and actions are appropriate to rational persons?

For Kukla, second nature is based on a model of perception. We all have the capacity to perceive, but some of us are better at it than others. The musician to whom listening to music is second nature may be highly critical of a performance I enjoy, but she has access to no more empirical evidence than I do. What the musician possesses is a better ability to discern relevant aspects of the experience and to integrate them within a network of beliefs that I lack (but could develop if I chose to do so). What I have that my logic students do not is long hours of reading and dissecting arguments, learning basic argument patterns, and constructing/deconstructing arguments. We each have the same perceptual experiences in these cases, but we have different abilities to recognize what is significant or relevant within those experiences. While we may process perceptual inputs differently, they still entitle us to the same warrants.

This is a type of sophisticated aperspectivalism that feminists would do well to take seriously for it allows epistemic distinctions to be made without a totalizing rationality. The alternative to a sophisticated aperspectivalism is a thoroughgoing perspectivalism, a clear example of which can be found in feminists who sometimes claim that women's experience is fundamentally different from men's experience. Usually, feminists make this claim in order to privilege women's experience—but that is not the only possibility. Men have made a distinction between men's and women's experience, invariably to the disadvantage of women. Claiming that different people have different experiences and that at least some of these experiences are in principle inaccessible to others does little to promote equality and inclusion. In fact, it gives good grounds for dismissing those views that we know to be inaccessible to us. The inclusive aims of feminist are best served by treating experience—and second natures—as open to all. Once we do this, however, we then need some way to distinguish among various second natures for not all second natures are themselves admirable or desirable.

Kukla and Laura Ruetsche (2002, pp. 410-411) observe that "for some men it is a *second nature* to dismiss women's testimony as not reason-providing, as [sic] least when it comes to certain topics...." I experienced this one time when relating a story about a tenure revocation case going on at my school. One of the grounds was that this female professor would go into campus offices and deliberately, vocally disrupt business until she got what she wanted. At this point in the story, a male philosopher said, with all seriousness, "what do you expect from a woman?" For this man, it was second nature to conclude that women are incapable of professionally appropriate behavior. But, surely, the doctrine of second nature should not defend this sort of sexist point of view.

Kukla and Ruetsche explain that not every second nature is educable—only the rational ones are. Some second natures, like automatically concluding that women cannot act professionally, are *irrational* because they are not receptive to reasons. Virtues are "not mere habits of feeling or action. Rather, they are receptive sensitivities to *reasons*, born out of proper upbringing, experience, and practice" (Kukla, 2006, p. 84). Kukla adds:

> Insouciance, inattention, impairment, and biases and prejudices that block or distort certain kinds of information all might hamper the cultivation of rationality, just as they can the moral virtues. But this is no argument against the rational modifiability of our contingently variable rational capacities. For not all dimensions of our second nature are *rational*. (2006, p. 88)

Engaging in willful ignorance may indeed diminish the functioning of one's own rational capacities, but we still need some means of distinguishing second natures that are educable and rational from those that are not. The structure of rationality offers guidance in making such distinctions.

Philosophers are usually concerned with what it is to reason well, thus, we often overlook the fact that reasoning poorly is still reasoning. My logic students who commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent are not thereby irrational. Quite the contrary, a necessary condition for committing a logical fallacy is the ability to reason. Even if we allow that some contemporary accounts of rationality work with feminism, resolving the problem of normativity requires that we explain what constitutes good reasoning. Until then, we may insist on perspectivalism, but we remain unable to defend our distinctions between better and worse perspectives—and we really must make these distinctions (see Hekman, 1997, p. 355). How then are feminists to make sense of the idea of what it is to reason well?

Tucked into discussions of rationality as a virtue concept is the more narrowly defined concept of reasonableness. Reasonableness is something the rational person should strive to achieve, but it is more limiting because one can be rational and remain obstinately unwilling to listen or respond to good reasons, lacking in good judgment or self-critical awareness, and governed by whim (see Audi, 2001, pp. 149-53, 171, 223, 263n16). Reasonable people, by contrast, must be willing to socially interact and to give and consider reasons according to which we are governed. In Burbles' (1995, p. 86) account, "[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." "Reasonableness" gives us a means to determine, in a principled manner, which views to discount, not because they are necessarily false but because they are uncooperative and exclusionary. It also gives us a means by which we can encourage those with other points of view to engage in dialogue.

Four structural elements are central to reasonableness: objectivity, fallibilism, pragmatism, and judiciousness.[4] Being reasonable requires us to consider not simply the reasons supporting our view but also those reasons that stand opposed to it; that is, we must be objective. Consider Audi's claim that

> The same sources that make it rational for different people to hold conflicting beliefs and to have disparate desires can make it possible for them to resolve disagreement in rational ways....

> Even where consensus is not possible... [o]ften we can also come to appreciate how and why others might rationally differ from us. The objectivity of the standards of rationality makes this appreciation possible; the internality of its grounds makes the plurality we can thus appreciate natural. (2001, p. 194)

When reasonable persons consider other perspectives and differing experiential grounds, they can do so on the basis of common standards that make this plurality possible (see Eze, 2008, pp. 3, 20). Reasonableness also requires one to be fallible; that is, to be willing to make cognitive mistakes, admit one is wrong, and reflect on how and why mistakes are made. To fail to do this is to exhibit a certain unreasonableness. When someone is unable or unwilling to admit that she could be mistaken, we then have grounds for discounting the reasonableness of that perspective. The requirement of judiciousness captures the idea that sometimes rational persons should refrain from applying the skills of rationality. At first glance, this is an odd requirement, but it simply expresses the idea that, at times we should be willing to let go of using solely rational demands and explore other avenues of arriving at conclusions or determining actions. To follow, without exception, the strict dictates of reason is to lose sight of the fact that argument and epistemic justification cannot solve all problems. Finally comes pragmatism, which signifies that one must consider contexts and the practical needs evident within humanity. This requirement also "reflects a tolerance for uncertainty, imperfection, and incompleteness as the existential conditions of human thought and action" (Eze, 2008, p. 94). Reasonable people will not privilege principle over human needs and purposes.

While these four criteria of reasonableness are contextualized and subject to bias in application, they also provide a means from which to evaluate differences. It gives us a place to begin when we consider both the rationality and reasonableness of others. In other words, virtue rationality, and the narrower concept of reasonableness, is able to explain this flexibility of rational activity, but it also has something to say about why other sorts of activities (say, randomly running onto a busy highway) fail to express rationality. For feminists, the advantage of this conception is that it is thoroughly immanent and engaged with the world yet still maintains a certain ground for normative discriminations among epistemic, ontological, and moral claims. It allows different points of view, but it is not committed to the rational equality of each of them. We can say that both accepting and rejecting first order propositional logic can be consistent with rationality, but for those who reject it, we expect some

alternative kind of reasoning that fulfills the function that standard logic fulfills for us. Thus, we have a framework in which to say that not everyone needs to think in the same way or come to the same conclusions, but we can also say, in certain cases, why some views fail to meet reasonable standards. The distinction between rationality and reasonability provides sufficient room to allow for some universal constraints on reason—after all, the overwhelming majority of humans do share reason in common, and we do so across cultural and contextual boundaries. However, it also provides room for the significance of context to the content of rationality. We can debate the details, but such a framework gives normativity and context-dependence. It also allows us to move beyond rationality's (and philosophy's) past transgressions.

Notes

[1] Given space limitations, I am unable to do justice to the great variety of perspectives that fall under the heading of "feminism." Instead, I attempt to focus on key themes that are echoed throughout feminist arguments, albeit not universally. In no way do I intend to speak for *all* feminists.

[2] For example, Cudworth and Masham (see Atherton, 2002) explicitly put the blame not on the concept of rationality but on how that concept is used by male philosophers. More recent defenders of rationality include Alcoff (1995), Antony (2002), Code (1993), Harding (1993), Longino (2005), Nagl-Docekal (1999), Nicholson (1999).

[3] This inverted pyramid has the cogito at its base and all other beliefs grounded upon that single point, like this: ▼.

[4] These are more fully developed in Burbles (1995).

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