Can Mind Be a Virtue?

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Feminist philosophers tend to ignore philosophy of mind. After all, "from the beginnings of philosophical thought," Genevieve Lloyd tells us, "femaleness was symbolically associated with what Reason supposedly left behind" (1984, p. 2). And, as Lorraine Code adds, "Implicitly or explicitly, rationality is an attribute of masculinity" (1991, p. 117). These are, of course, not isolated remarks. Reason and rationality are concepts widely considered "stultifying, monolithic, and insensitive to cultural diversity" (Burbules, 1995, p. 83-84). Furthermore, feminists have clearly and thoroughly shown that rationality excludes both body and emotion and, thus, is central to much of what is wrong with androcentric, malestream philosophy.

Historically speaking, I agree. While the ancients were not exactly progressive, Descartes' epistemological revolution reinforced the complete erasure of women from the realm of reason and mind. Still, normative terms are not fixed in meaning, a point feminist philosophers have been arguing for decades. Alessandra Tanesini, for example, implores us to explain the content of normative words like "reason" and "knowledge" "by looking at the inferential-explanatory role these words have in current practice, and at how this role is shaped by social facts" (1996, p. 358). In contemporary thinking, reason is largely taken to be an immanent, not transcendent, faculty that is in and of the world. This transformation has implications for feminist philosophy for it implies that "reason" is no less socially constructed than any other concept. Thus, we need not treat "reason" as something that essentially excludes body, emotion, the social world, or women. Feminists can and should lay claim to rationality.

While dichotomous Enlightenment descriptions have dominated philosophy for the past several centuries, Cartesian ways of thinking are no longer hegemonous in philosophical thinking thanks, in part, to the work of feminists. Nevertheless, despite feminism's sustained critiques of dichotomous thinking, many feminists remain unintentionally wedded to modern discourse and defend specifically modern values. Seyla Benhabib makes this point directly:

> What is baffling . . . is the lightheartedness with which postmodernists simply assume or even posit those hyper-universalists and superliberal values of diversity, heterogeneity, eccentricity and otherness. In doing so they rely on the very norms of the autonomy of subjects and the rationality of democratic procedures which otherwise they seem to so blithely dismiss. What concept of reason . . . allows us to retain these values and the institutions within which these values flourish and become ways of life? (1992, p. 16)

What Benhabib notes is that because the values many feminists assert are grounded in modernism, to reject modernism is to undermine the ground of those values.[1] Diversity, heterogeneity, eccentricity, and otherness are still touted—all while feminists continue to attack the notions of autonomy and reason that underlie their moral force for feminists. We must, with Benhabib, ask the question: what concept of reason we are willing to defend?

For any theory of rationality to be a plausibly acceptable *feminist* theory, surely it needs to be, at heart, anti-modern. Somewhat surprisingly, however, it may not need to originate from feminism itself. A great many mainstream accounts of rationality are not only deeply anti-modern in their approach but also deeply sympathetic to rejecting

dichotomous understandings of mind. In fact, radical critiques of Cartesianism have become so common and so forceful in the philosophical world that the most conservative and mainstream philosophers have difficulty remaining entirely Cartesian in their thinking—even in as "hard minded" a field as the philosophy of mind. The import of recognizing humans as evolutionarily developed has been to recognize reason, not as something emerging from an immaterial or transcendental cogito, but rather as an evolutionary adaption immersed in a world of stable biological and social facts. More specifically, reason is an outgrowth of evolutionary processes. As a result, philosophers increasingly share, as David Papinau puts it, "a disinclination to suppose that there is anything metaphysically unique about human minds" (2006, p. 1). For better or for worse, mind is, for the first time since the Greeks, recognized as immanent.

Such a shift toward an evolutionary perspective undermines philosophical allegiances to a Cartesian account of rationality. Robert Nozick, for example, consciously acknowledges this, saying that "there is no reason to think that evolution would shape our rationality to conform to . . . Cartesian individualism" (1993, p. 178). Instead, Nozick provides an instrumental account of reason in which "rational behavior is aimed at achieving the goals, desires, and ends that people have" (1993, p. 64), but this view also leads him to argue that "We human beings are partial creatures, not wholly autonomous. We are part of the natural world, designed to work in tandem with other parts and facts, dependent upon them" (1993, p. 123). Gone is the absolutely autonomous reasoner. Other dramatic expressions of anti-Cartesianism come from the more empirically oriented field of cognitive science. Antonio Damasio maintains that "our minds would not be the way they are if it were not for the interplay of body and

brain during evolution . . . . The mind has to be about the body, or it could not have been" (1994, p. xvi). Gone is the absolute separation of mind and body. And it is not just bodies that are central to mind these days. Susan Greenfield maintains that "Emotions must somehow be incorporated into any neuroscience Rosetta Stone" (2000, p. 16). Gone is the absolute exclusion of emotion from the domain of the rational. These are not isolated statements. Throughout cognitive science one finds sustained arguments that reason and its concepts are thoroughly embodied.[2]

The result of the confluence of Cartesian critiques and evolutionary accounts of mind is to move our understanding of rationality toward non-modern ways of thinking.[3] That is, our anti-modern awakening has attuned us to a link between human interests and our ways of knowing such that Hilary Putnam (among others) argues repeatedly that "our norms and standards always reflect our interests and values" (1990, p. 21). It has further attuned us to an ineliminable connection between our historical location and the identity of the self, so much so that Alastair MacIntyre can tell us in all seriousness that we are "born with a past" (1981, p. 221). It has further attuned us to the need for rationality to respond to its physical and cultural environment. Again, Nozick argues that "rationality is an evolutionary adaptation with a delimited purpose and function, designed to work in conjunction with other stable facts that it takes for granted and builds upon" (1993, p. xii); Robert Audi maintains that "reason can embrace indefinitely many cultures" (2001, p. 189); and post-colonial philosopher Emmanuel Eze claims that "Rationality, like a work of art, is best appreciated from multiple points of view" (2008, p. xii). But enough of this.

The growing realization that we cannot sustain past divisions between fact and value, self and world, reason and culture have led philosophers to consider theories of rationality that are much less "stultifying, monolithic, and insensitive to cultural diversity" than previous Enlightenment ones. In fact, contemporary theories of rationality appear almost Wittgensteinian in their willingness to return "reason" to its ordinary use by recognizing it as an everyday concept that orients us in the world. Rather than treating rationality as some formal, universal standard for epistemologically justifying beliefs, mainstream accounts focus on a responsiveness to the environment—very much along the lines, I believe, of old fashioned, pre-modern virtue concepts.[4]

Take reason to be a capacity to engage in practices that emerge from our interactions with a material, social, and emotional environment. What this provides is clear, variable constraints related to how well it achieves goods that are determined by some specifiable end. That is, it tells us what it is to believe or act rationally. The ends of rationality, however, cannot be either universal or chosen solely by individuals exercising their reason in generalized Rawlsian sorts of ways. Once we take reason to be a natural part of a larger world, what it means for a human to flourish cannot be separated from the specifics of the environment. If "no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor . . . his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like" (Rawls, 1971, p. 12) or even his conception of the good or special psychological propensity, then he would have nothing upon which to judge what is reasonable—or even—rational to believe about how to comport oneself in the world or how to establish principles governing social arrangements. After all, we live our lives in relation to goods that are understood

concretely for creatures like us in *our* social and historical circumstances. The ends that we choose are only meaningful for us with within these contexts.

Now, such talk of ends is a reminder that virtue concepts are capacity concepts that are, of course, teleological in nature. In ancient accounts, these capacities and their ends were largely constrained by pre-ordained essences. Contemporary virtue accounts, however, are far less tied to essentialism and much more tied to the idea of social practices. The example of playing chess is an obvious one. While there is a telos to the game of chess, this end is not given independently of convention or of the contingently determined rules of the game. Similarly with rationality, albeit perhaps with less contingency. Our contemporary preference for evolutionary frameworks transforms and extends the essentialism of the ancients by forcing us to account for contingent, empirical constraints. If rationality has developed as a way for us to achieve biological goals, Nozick tells us, "it is not surprising that an attempt rationally to derive goals *de novo*, starting without *any* goals or desires, fails" (1993, p. 163).[5] The ends of rationality may not be metaphysically determined, but neither are they random. In addition, the stable features of the world in which rationality functions includes not simply biological facts but social facts as well. After all, reason develops in an environment that includes other people, and our ability to interact socially with people is absolutely central to our rationality.[6] Furthermore, there will be times at which it becomes "rational to accept something because others in your society do" (Nozick, 1993, p. 129). We can and do choose our own ends, but we do not do so *carte blanche*. The ends that are available to us as "live options" depend not only on our biology but also on a world that is experienced through biology and through acculturation. In this scheme, virtues allow for

choice, but they cannot be whatever we want them to be because we must account for the stable biological and social facts of the world in which we live.

Unlike the moderns, with their thoroughly epistemic understanding of rationality, the open-ended teleology of virtue moves us away from conflating rationality with justification. A virtue is a trait or characteristic that produces habits of action that are conducive to *living* a good life, not simply justifying beliefs.[7] Reason can be understood as doing precisely this. After all, it is what allows us to successfully navigate the world, even when we cannot articulate the methods or procedures we use to do so. The most fully developed version of rationality as a capacity concept comes from Audi. He takes a strong stand against both Archimedean starting points and equating reason with justification.[8] Like Benhabib, Audi argues that rationality cannot be properly understood from a Cartesian framework. Instead, we need to recognize reason as a capacity that governs our interaction with a material and social world. Reason helps us to identify goods and to guide us toward them. Audi replaces the "bad cognitive architecture" of Archimedean foundations with the image of a tree having a complex root system that grows, changes, and even dies over time.[9] In this case, the justification of beliefs comes from a variety of interconnected sources, all of which are defeasible—but, of course, justified beliefs are one thing; rational or reasonable beliefs are something else entirely.

Any garden variety discussion of epistemic defeasibility demonstrates that not every belief held by a rational person will be justified. Unlike justification, which ideally depends upon being epistemologically well-grounded in non-defeasible sorts of ways,

the main criterion for the rationality of a belief is appropriateness to a rational person. Burbules tells us:

> 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. These qualities . . . are manifested in a broad range of situations that are not governed by formal rules. (1995, p. 86)

In other words, while there are *kinds* of beliefs, including moral beliefs, that a rational person will typically have, but there are no *specific* beliefs or rules that define rationality. Contrary to Cartesian notions, the virtue concept of rationality is not methodological or rule-governed. It is instead a structural concept whose substance is affected by the content it encounters and by the ways in which it seems appropriate to respond to that content. This account relates to Benhabib's moral concern. She argues,

> If reason is the contingent achievement of linguistically socialized, finite and embodied creatures, then the legislative claims of practical reason must also be understood in interactionist terms. We may mark a shift here from legislative to interactive rationality. . . . The moral point of view is not an Archimedean center from which the moral philosopher pretends to be able to move the world. The moral point of view articulates rather a certain stage in the development of linguistically socialized human beings when they start to reason about general rules governing their mutual existence from the standpoint of a hypothetical questioning . . ." (1992, p. 6)

Of course, a great deal must be said about what constitutes "appropriateness to a rational person" and the "general rules governing our mutual existence." This is where achieving goods comes fully into the picture.

In any virtue account, virtue is not simply an activity but an activity that involves dispositions to feel and act in particular ways. Virtues affect conduct, and conduct fundamentally shapes our lives for better or worse. Contrary to universalist accounts, what is good or bad cannot be determined *a priori*; rather, it is constituted by what it is for creatures like us to flourish in the world in which we are immersed. Reason, then, will be enacted (often imperfectly) in social and environmental contexts that give rise to the reasonableness of beliefs. Aristotle tells us, for example, "anyone can get angry or give money or spend it, . . . But to give to the right person, the right amount, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right manner, this is not something that anyone can do nor is it easy to do" (1983, p. 1109a27-30). Virtue depends on context. And as Burbules adds, "No one can be expected to be reasonable in entirely unreasonable circumstances" (1995, p. 88). No necessary and sufficient conditions can be given for what it is to act rationally since rationality adapts itself to the circumstance. What is reasonable for a person to do (i.e., what expresses the virtue of rational belief and activity) will depend upon the particular details of the situation in which that person finds herself.

The concept of rationality, when considered a virtue, overcomes, dissolves, and otherwise resolves the split between mind and world, between reason and emotion, between self and others. After all, it now demands that we act in the world in which we actually live. It demands that we determine our interests in the context of stable, but not

immutable, facts. And it demands that we recognize our need to function in a biological, emotion, social, and physical world. Taken pragmatically, it further allows us to address superliberal values of diversity, heterogeneity, eccentricity and otherness. These values are not inherently modern, but anti-modern assertions of them require anti-modern grounds. Not surprisingly, feminists can and do argue that people and societies that adopt these values flourish more and have better beliefs.[10] A virtue account of rationality can provide a theoretical underpinning for how these values enhance human cognitive and social flourishing.

Of course, the reasonableness of one's beliefs, desire, and actions can only be determined in contexts, and we can always ask: which contexts? Indeed, feminists are keen to ask this question because the history of philosophy has been one in which contexts are overlooked, much to the detriment of those outside the privileged group. In many ways, the feminist and the pragmatist share this concern for context and share a concern that our contexts be considered as broadly as possible. In the case of the virtuous reasoner, she "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 . . . and so on" (Burbules, 1995, p. 86). The capacity to reason, when expressed most fully, does not adopt a method of tenacity or authority or even aprioricity in Peirce's terminology, nor is it narrow or exclusionary in its approach. Rather, reason is best expressed when it moves beyond tenaciously held beliefs, beyond appeals to authority, beyond narrow evidential claims, and beyond formal rules of reasoning. Reason is best expressed when it adapts to situations that are messily diverse in ways that allow us to achieve the goods internal to a practice.

Benhabib asks us, what concept of reason we are willing to defend? Her answer is one that situates "reason and the moral self more decisively in context of gender and community" all the while allowing us to challenge these contexts in the name of "universalistic principles, future identities and as yet undiscovered communities" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 8). She wants us to shift from "a substanitialistic to a discursive communicative concept of rationality" (1992, p. 5). A virtue account of rationality fits this model insofar as it promotes a standard constituted within lived contexts.

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[1] This point is developed more fully in Heikes (2010, pp. 14-26).

[2] See Lakoff and Johnson (1999). Also see Clark (1998).

[3] This trend is obvious in, say, communitarian ethics or in the influence of medieval thought on French postmodernism. For more on the influence of medievalism on French philosophy, see Holsinger (2005). Also see Toulmin (2001).

[4] Those who have specifically argued that rationality is a virtue concept include Audi and Burbules.

[5] Even though I am using Nozick as a model of an evolutionary account of rationality, he does not present a specifically virtue account of rationality.

[6] An anecdote from a neurologist illustrates this point clearly.

"I had been advised early in life that sound decisions came from a cool head, that emotions and reason did not mix any more than oil and water. I had grown up accustomed to thinking that the mechanisms of reason existed in a separate province of the mind, where emotion should not be allowed to intrude . . . .

But now I had before my eyes the coolest, least emotional, intelligent human being one might imagine, and yet his practical reason was so impaired that it produced, in the wanderings of daily life, a succession of mistakes, a perpetual violation of what would be considered socially appropriate and personally advantageous. . . . He had the requisite knowledge, attention, and memory; his language was flawless; he could perform calculations; he could tackle the logic of an abstract problem. There was only

one significant accompaniment to his decision-making failure: a marked alteration of the ability to experience feelings." (Damasio, 1994, pp. xi-xii)

[7] A slightly more technical definition comes from MacIntyre: virtue is "an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 191).

[8] Audi's account does retain a certain conservatism that would not be acceptable to many feminist philosophers. For example, Audi is conflicted about the inclusion of emotion within the domain of reason. For a broader, but less detailed, account of virtue, see Burbules (1995).

[9] See Audi (2001, p. 40).

[10] See Antony (2002), Harding (1993), Nelson (1993).