The Importance of Rationality

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Michael Hauskeller (“Reflections from a Troubled Stream: Giubliani and Minerva on ‘After-Birth Abortion’) has recently suggested that we should resist rationalist tendencies in moral discourse: “[I]s not *all* morality ultimately irrational? Even the most strongly held moral convictions can be shown to lack a rational basis.” (Hauskeller 2012, p. 18) Hauskeller was responding to Alberto Giubliani and Francesca Minverva’s (2012) recent defense of the permissibility of killing infants, but his anti-rationality arguments have wide-reaching implications. Yet *pace* Hauskeller, rationality is indeed of crucial importance to any ethical argument. We should not abandon rationality for the sake of refuting one discomforting hypothesis; instead, rationality must be rigorously employed, here and elsewhere, in the search for the truth.

While Hauskeller is not entirely consistent in how he characterizes rationality, there is at least one recurring conception. This is the logical sense of rationality – the logical coherence of one’s ideas. Certainly it is debatable whether logical coherence is sufficient for rationality, but it is at least a necessary condition on most concepts – one’s conclusions must logically follow from one’s premises (all of which are clearly stated). In this sense, Giubliani and Minerva are certainly attempting to make a rational argument – they have two premises (roughly, infants, like fetuses, are potential persons, not actual persons; and, potential persons are not wronged when they are inhibited from becoming actual persons, e.g., by killing them) that entail a conclusion (it is not wrong to kill an infant).

Minimal rationality is essential for any argument, including moral argument, to be sound. Without minimal rationality, any given argument will be self-contradictory or incoherent. While there is not space here to offer a full-throated defense of the importance of minimal rationality, I will simply point out that a) there is incredible intuitive force behind the importance of consistency and coherence; and b) moral discourse would become hopelessly confused if we were to allow that interlocutors might, while accepting some claim, be simultaneously denying that very claim (which is generally an implication of an irrational argument).

At times, Hauskeller appears to be acutely aware of this importance. He writes that the absurdity of Giubliani and Minerva’s conclusion give him reason to doubt their premises. Fair enough – the premises are far from obviously true. However, that does not mean there is a tension here between morality and rationality. Instead, it emphasizes their happy union: in the face of an argument that is logically valid, we are more or less rationally required to either accept the conclusion or reject at least one of the premises. Giubliani and Minerva choose to accept the conclusion, while Hauskeller chooses to reject at least one the premises. They are both operating within the bounds of rationality (as far as this argument goes), though they will dispute whose move is more reasonable.

Hauskeller, however, obscures the nature of the debate by claiming that what is actually at issue are fundamentally different conceptions of the relationship between morality and rationality. He concludes that when a philosophical argument challenges considered notions about the wrongness of killing, “we should not be swayed by its appearance of rationality, but rather take it as our cue to rethink the way we practice philosophical ethics.” (Hauskeller 2012, p. 20) This is the wrong reaction. In the face of a controversial but logically valid moral argument, we should not respond by rejecting rational approaches to morality. We should instead carefully and critically investigate the premises. And if we find no fault there, we may have no choice but to accept that conventional wisdom – no matter how compelling – may indeed be quite mistaken.

Works cited:

Michael Hauskeller, “Reflections from a Troubled Stream: Giubilini and Minerva

on ‘After-Birth Abortion,’” *Hastings Center Report* 42, no. 4 (2012): 17-20.

Alberto Giubilini and Francesca, “After-Birth Abortion: Why Should the Baby live,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* (online first, February 13, 2012).