LET'S BE REASONABLE: FEMINISM AND RATIONALITY

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Throughout much of feminist philosophy, there is a consensus that the concept of Cartesian rationality, with its emphasis on dichotomies that valorize so-called masculine qualities, has been a key source of the silencing of women.[1] As feminists have extensively argued, rationality is often defined in terms of what it is not—and what it is not is inevitably associated with qualities perceived to be feminine. The problem for feminists moving forward, however, is that Cartesian understandings of rationality are largely a thing of the past. There are new ways of conceiving of rationality that may have their roots in Descartes and the Enlightenment but that are vastly different from these understandings of rationality. Furthermore, these contemporary approaches to rationality are in many ways consistent with feminist concerns. Feminists would be well served by looking more closely at contemporary understandings of rationality and by being willing to engage in debates over rationality. The idea is not that we need to establish a *feminist* theory of rationality but rather that feminists need to engage in current discussions of rationality in order to avoid being silenced—this time by choice rather than design.

In discussing the current relevance of feminist critiques of reason, Linda Martin Alcoff (1995, p. 6) maintains that:

> [T]he feminist critique of reason is not obsessing over an outdated conception of reason but [is] revealing the implicit assumptions still operative in even the minimal conception of reason endorsed today. In other words, the idea of a radical break (or incommensurable paradigm shift) between Modernist concepts of Reason and modern accounts of reason is both implausible and in fact mistaken.

In one way Alcoff is clearly correct. There is little reason to believe that there has been a radical, incommensurable break with modernist concepts of rationality. On the other hand, her claim does seem mistaken in its assumption that such conceptions are alive and well. The fact is that few, if any, of the major assumptions upon which Cartesian rationality is founded have survived the 20th Century intact. Central features of modernist conceptions of reason include:

- Reason is a ground for a unified, autonomous self capable of understanding and controlling the world.

- Reason, correctly used, results in universal knowledge.
- Reason provides an objective foundation for knowledge, such that conflicts about the truth of claims can be resolved through its application.
- Reason, not the faculties of the body, is the primary human faculty for gaining knowledge.

I believe that a careful examination of each of these claims would show that each of them has encountered widespread criticism, if not downright rejection, throughout mainstream (and often decidedly non-feminist) philosophy. But since I do not have sufficient time for a careful examination, a brief examination should be sufficient to establish the *prima facie* plausibility of the death of Cartesian conceptions of rationality.

I take it that the above claims present the following story about reason: reason is a disembodied and universal faculty that is capable of objectively knowing the world, with certainty, solely through the use of its own principles. What feminists typically reject in this story is rationality's disembodiment, universality, objectivity, quest for certainty, and individualism—in other words, everything. Feminists are, however, not alone in wanting to tell a different tale about rationality. While there is good reason to believe that there are still residual elements of Cartesian rationality within contemporary discussions, the terms "reason" and "rationality" do not have the same import they did even a century ago.

In their book *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) argue that we need to change our understanding of reason in response to research into cognitive science, research that tells a quite different story from the Enlightenment one. Included in their discussion are the following divergences from modernist conceptions of rationality:

- Reason is not disembodied... but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience...
- Reason is evolutionary... [i.e., it develops within and in response to the environment].
- Reason is not universal in the transcendent sense; ...it is [however] a capacity shared universally by all human beings...
- Reason is not completely conscious, but mostly unconscious.
- Reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 4)

Each of these claims about reason stands in contrast to the Enlightenment conception of reason introduced by Descartes, and each claim can be found in contemporary accounts of rationality. To illustrate this, I take two solidly mainstream accounts as my examples: Robert Nozick's *The Nature of Rationality* and Robert Audi's *The Architecture of Reason*. Nozick's

account of rationality is built upon the foundation of evolutionary adaptations to the world and upon decision theory, while Audi's approach builds on the idea that rationality is a virtue concept and that the standard for what is rational is rational persons. These philosophers offer accounts of rationality closer to both current claims of cognitive science and to feminists' concerns.

The initial two claims of Lakoff and Johnson, that reason is not disembodied and that it is evolutionary, lie at the heart of Nozick's account of rationality.[2] One of the central features of Nozick's view is his claim that reason does *not* determine the structure of the world; instead, the world determines the structure of reason. Nozick (1993, p. 112) maintains that: "Reason tell us about reality because reality shapes reason, selecting for what seems 'evident.'" In fact, rationality is nothing more than an evolutionary adaptation that is constrained by variable, contingent features of the world. It is what it is because it has evolved in a particular environment, and the decision-theoretic principles that function within it are not *a priori* but are the result of interactions with stable features of the world. For Nozick, rationality is so fully involved in the world that when we ask questions that assume a separation we find ourselves in philosophically troubled waters. Problems such as induction, the existence of the external world, or even the mind/body problem are knotty points that resist philosophical solutions precisely because they go beyond reason's delimited function (Nozick, 1993, p. xii).[3] On Nozick's account, it makes little sense to think of reason as disembodied, and it makes absolutely no sense to view it as independent of evolutionary forces.

The next two of Lakoff and Johnson's claims, that reason is universal but not transcendent and that it is not completely conscious, are central to Audi's account of rationality. Early on in his book, Audi (2003, p. 33) writes:

> I conceive rational persons not as constantly reasoning, or as always self-consciously logical, in arriving at beliefs but rather as having in some sense internalized rational standards which then guide them without the conscious thoughts one might cite in explicitly rationalizing their behavior. This is not to deny that rational persons must be capable of reasoning; the point is that reasoning is not the only manifestation of our rationality nor a constant element in the formation of our beliefs.

This way of understanding rationality denies the centrality of conscious deductions based on principles and focuses instead on patterns of belief and action that are appropriately responsive to the world, regardless of whether one consciously thinks about them. The idea of rationality as a virtue

concept broadens rationality beyond that what is merely circumscribed by principles of justification. Instead, the standard of rationality is given by rational persons, who do not in every instance believe or act rationally. On an individual level, beliefs or actions that are rational for one person may not be rational for others, depending upon foundational experiences and inferences made possible on the basis of that foundation. On a societal level, much of the content of rationality is provided not merely by the biological aspects of perception and experience but also by aspects of one's culture. Audi (2001, p. 9) maintains that "[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." This way of understanding rationality is consistent with concerns of inclusiveness of differing perspectives, but it does not abandon rationality's stable universal structure, which is given through the well-groundedness and integration of one's attitudes and actions in experience.

With respect to the last of cognitive science's insights into reason—the claim that reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged—it is somewhat surprising that it is Nozick's account and not Audi's that appears more fully to recognize the role of emotion in rationality. While Audi (2001, pp. 202-204) allows room for emotion, he is quick to say that emotions are prone to irrationality when grounded in irrational belief and that a poverty of emotion is not necessarily a deficiency in rationality. Nozick, on the other hand, includes in his account a discussion of symbolic utility which draws upon the emotional meaning of other actions; Nozick (1993, pp. 26-35, 106) even argues that rationality (and a decision-theoretic rationality at that) can pursue emotion, passion, and spontaneity. Whatever differences there are in the details of these two approaches, each clearly allows for emotion within the domain of the rational. For both philosophers, there is little cause to believe rationality is entirely dispassionate, just as there is little cause to believe rationality is transcendent, absolutely objective, radically individual, or fully self-conscious.

Now, obviously, this is simply a brief summary of only two contemporary philosophers' views on rationality. However, these two conceptions fall firmly within what feminists often find to be the most conservative and irredeemably androcentric philosophic tradition, so-called analytic philosophy. Surely if our understanding of rationality is to be stuck in the Enlightenment, the Anglo-American tradition, which is its most obvious heir, would reflect this. Yet, in key aspects of their conceptions of rationality, Nozick and Audi each reject the story of rationality as inherently

disconnected from the material world, as transcendentally universal, as seeking absolute certainty, as governed by *a priori* principles, or as socially isolated. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Both Nozick and Audi recognize rationality as dependent upon experience, including social experience, without any underlying transcendence and without the possibility of achieving certain knowledge. Neither philosopher gives grounds to believe he has much allegiance to the characterization of Cartesian reason given above. And when we further consider these accounts, each appears much closer to feminist beliefs than Cartesian ones. Reason is still given some primacy over body, but Nozick and Audi each allow that the body is essential to gaining knowledge. Additionally, each asserts a social dimension to knowledge, rejects the possibility of indubitable premises, and denies an objective structure (i.e., one independent of experience) to the world. The assumptions upon which current theories of rationality are built would not seem to be the same as the assumptions of the Enlightenment. Thus, while feminist philosophers might choose to reject these views on other grounds, we cannot do so on the grounds that they continue the tradition of Enlightenment rationality for they clearly diverge from that tradition on issues of central importance. Thus, remaining question, is whether feminists should reject such efforts to philosophically understand rationality: is the task of understanding reason simply androcentric at the outset?

In feminism, there are three main options when it comes to attacking the concept of reason: reject reason as an irredeemably andocentric concept; re-define reason in a less gender determined manner; or argue that there is nothing wrong with reason but rather the error is in how particular philosophers have made use of it. The first of these options is the most radical, viz., rejecting reason outright. While rejection usually stems from postmodern feminism, other feminists, such as Nancy Hartsock (1987, p. 190) and Selya Benhabib (1992, pp. 228-229), argue that this approach undermines feminist projects. Even feminists more sympathetic to postmodern feminism are skeptical about feminism's ability to do without "rationality." Alcoff (1995, p. 10), who is no great defender of rationality, nonetheless argues that "feminist philosophy cannot entirely forego the recourse to reason, objectivity, and truth."[4] But the problem for her, as for all feminists who find a deep-seated, perhaps ineliminable, sexism in philosophical theories of reason, is how to conceive of reason, objectivity, and truth in the face of radical rejections of these concepts. What is left of such concepts after their foundations have been dismantled? It is one thing to say that feminism requires recourse to such concepts; it is another thing entirely to say what this means if we also argue that substantive accounts of

reason are fundamentally and irredeemably masculine. Yet, if we give up on the concept of rationality, where is the objectivity and truth of feminist claims concerning the injustice of sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination? How can we expect to successfully argue against our opponents when we have dismissed that which lies at the heart of any good argument, namely, reason?

Both Nozick and Audi recommend a limited relativism in which the conditions according to which reason is relative can be clearly specified. This sort of relativism is similar to that advocated by Lorraine Code (1993, pp. 40-41) in which knowledge is always *relative to* specifiable circumstances and is constrained by realist and empiricist commitments. This limited relativism is constructive and helpful in understanding rationality. After all, the environment and our experiences of it do matter to the issue of what it is rational for one to believe or do. This sort of relativity, in fact, lies at the heart of rationality for if reason is to function well, it must be able to adapt to various and changing circumstances. Not being able to adapt means not being rational at all. Thus, being capable of responding differently in different sorts of specific circumstances is what makes it so powerful in coping with the world. On the other hand, if we go a step further and argue that such relativity entails a lack of common elements of rationality, it is unclear how rational debate could avoid ending in a deep-seated irrationalism.

An example that feminists care deeply about illustrates this point. Feminists believe that philosophy has consistently excluded women and that such exclusion is not only wrong but should be eliminated. Such claims are based on clear readings of philosophical texts and on the experience of women. The value judgments in these claims are presumably based on some commitment to the ideals of equality and fairness. However, one does not need to look too far in actual philosophical discourse to find contrasting claims. So-called malestream philosophers can, and do, present arguments decrying the genetic fallacy in feminist epistemology and appealing to standards of rationality that exclude precisely the subjective elements that feminists claim to be important. Are these philosophers correct that there is a universal character to experience? Or, is it feminists, insisting on a diversity of voices, who have the stronger claim? These questions, and others like them, do need a philosophical response, and surely there must be rational grounds to support the feminist side of the debate. If rationality lacks some robustly universal elements and is solely the product of social and cultural standards, feminists can do little more to point to the disagreement and mouth disapproval. There is nothing substantive that can back up those objections if rationality is simply determined by, say, social

practices. To make an argument for some truth about oppression or some wrongness of it requires that my interlocutor and I share some standards in common. To ground arguments in standards that are solely the result of some shared social practice will work as long as these shared standards permit such argument to take place. But how to do we argue with those who insist that there is nothing wrong with oppression? We can hope to change minds through politics or power in these cases, but might does not make right. Unless the claims of feminism are to be merely accidentally true, we need some grounds to present reasoned arguments, even when the other side does not wish to engage in reasoned argument. Feminists need some understanding of rationality sufficient to ground their arguments. To turn our backs to this is to risk undermining the significance of feminist arguments.

In *Reason, Truth, and History*, Putnam (1982, p. 163) argues that "Rationality may not be defined by a 'canon' or set of principles, *but* we do have an evolving conception of the cognitive virtues to guide us." Feminist philosophers would do well to consider what cognitive virtues guide them, not simply in the asking of specific philosophical questions but more broadly in how we understand what it is to reason, how that understanding fits within the history of philosophy, and most importantly, how that understanding seeks to unite or divide us. Any good conception of rationality must explain how diversity fits within unity, and unless our goal is to be infinite fragmentation, this is something that feminists must do as well. Understanding that we can formulate and debate conceptions of rationality that are distinct from Enlightenment conceptions can only add to the resources for feminist debate.

Notes

[1] In this paper, I focus much of my attention on Cartesian rationality, but much of the discussion is relevant to a broader conception of Enlightenment rationality. While not all philosophers of the modern period share Descartes' view of reason, Descartes establishes the major assumptions of the period. Given the length of this paper, I cannot do justice to the differences in various conceptions, especially between the rationalists and empiricists, so I try to refer mostly to qualities that are typically held by most of the moderns.

[2] I do not mean to imply that Audi's account of rationality rejects these claims or that Nozick's view rejects the claims that follow in the next paragraph. In the interests of simplicity and brevity, I have divided the discussion among those aspects of rationality I find most central to each account.

[3] Also see Nozick (1993, p. 121).

[4] To be fair, Alcoff herself does not engage in a radical rejection of rationality, but she does express sympathies with this position.

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