

Challenges to Rationality

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When I first read Jon Fennell's stimulating essay I felt like an eavesdropper on a dispute that had been going on a long time in a language I thought I recognized but was not quite sure. My first thought: Why me? I am no epistemologist or metaphysician. But then I thought: maybe the disputants are stuck and maybe a fresh voice can help them resolve or clarify their differences.

I think both Fennell and Harvey Siegel enunciate a core conviction that is correct. Harvey's is that whether the conclusion of an argument *is justified* by its premises is one question, whether someone *recognizes* that the conclusion is justified is a different question. Some celebrated arguments, are recognized as cogent by only a few people with the most specialized training — I am thinking, for example, of Andrew Wiles's proof of Fermat's last theorem. Fermat, himself, could not begin to understand Wiles's proof.

Fennell's core conviction is that an argument may be vetted by all the best logicians, but a person who will not (or cannot) make the effort to attend to it will not perceive its cogency. Fennell takes justification to be a verb that takes a direct and an indirect object. One justifies *something* to *someone*. Surely if the lengthy exchange between Harvey and Fennell is supposed to be motivated by a "live problem," one facing real teachers in real classrooms, that's the kind of justification that matters. I am with Fennell on this, but I will say a brief word about a decontextualized notion of justification below. So how might students how might they challenge such a commitment, and how should we respond? Here are five scenarios:

First, our first class is one of illiterate peasants from remote areas of Uzbekistan, whose ways of thinking were investigated by the Russian psychologist, A.R. Luria: Prof: "In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears?"¹ Peasant: "I don't know. I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others...Each locality has its own animals."² Is this response rational? It appears not to be, but as Walter Ong remarks after citing the example, "You find what color bears are by looking at them. Who ever heard of reasoning out in practical life the color of a polar bear? Besides, how am I sure that you know for sure that all bears are white in a snowy country?"³ Although it looks as if this student is unable to appreciate the force of reason, that really is not the case; he is simply failing to understand the "language game" of the introductory logic classroom. I would trust him to track bears which is certainly a rational pursuit, but not to track fallacies.

Second: William (a student): I do not understand why you are making such a big deal about applying principles consistently and fairly. Ethics is not about reasoning; you just need to do what your gut tells you is right. Prof: You have just failed this course, William. My gut tells me you do not deserve to pass. William: You are

kidding me, right. You cannot fail me just because I disagree with you. Your syllabus says I will be judged on the exams and we have not even had one yet. If you are serious, I will go right to the dean. Prof: And what would you tell him? William: I would tell him you treated me totally arbitrarily, that you had no reason to fail me except you did not like my point of view. It is hoped that this experience (in which the professor illustrates one of Fennell's strategies for responding to challenges to rationality) will help William acknowledge that he has a stronger commitment to rationality than he was ready to admit.

Third: Prof: You asked me for a reference to philosophy grad school. Jack: Yes, I would really like to be a philosophy prof someday myself. Prof: I will be happy to write for you, but you should consider schools other than MIT and Harvard. Your GPA is not that high, and you picked two of the most selective schools. Jack: Well, I really want to be in Boston; my girl friend lives there. Prof: Why not apply to Boston University? They have a pretty good program; I am pretty sure you can get in there. Jack: I figure, like, if I cannot get into one of the top programs, I will just do something else. I can always get a job in computers. Is Jack acting irrationally? He may be acting foolishly and he may come to regret his decision. It would certainly be worth Jack's while to think about his priorities more seriously, possibly with the help of a counselor. But Jack is certainly rational in the sense that he has and can give reasons for what he is doing.

Fourth: Joan: You taught us this theory yesterday about what makes acts right or wrong. How do you tell if the theory is right? Prof: Well, just as with other theories, we see how, compared to the alternatives, it accounts for the evidence, the evidence here being our most unshakable judgments in particular actual or hypothetical cases. Joan: But what justifies that approach to testing a theory? Prof: Well, it is pretty much the approach we use in science and in any sphere where we are looking for the truth. Joan: Suppose I admit this is the best way of getting at the truth. Why should we seek the truth? Prof: It is not rational to prefer falsehood and ignorance to truth. Joan: But how do you justify rationality? Fennell claims that we need not worry about Joan, because her challenge to the justification of rationality, necessarily makes use of the very tools whose justification she is challenging. Joan is already "under the tent" as Fennell puts it.

Though I think he would agree, Siegel thinks that is not the end of the matter so far as philosophy is concerned. He believes that if skepticism is to be avoided, there had better be a theory justifying rationality itself, while Fennell does not see how there can be such a theory. Like Siegel, I think we can make a pretty good case for rationality by showing that anyone who wants what is best (or at least what is good) is better off acting on true than false beliefs, and beliefs formed rationally have the best chance of being true. Of course this argument will not be persuasive to a two year-old, a schizophrenic or a kid who will not take his headphones off. Fennell is correct about that, but I do not think Siegel would disagree.

Fifth: Thomas: I have always believed in God, my whole family is very religious. I have been following your lectures carefully, and it seems like the arguments against God's existence are strong, pretty convincing really, but I really

feel God has and will continue to take care of me. And going to church services with my family is still a very important part of my life. So, maybe I am acting irrationally. Is that such a terrible thing? Prof: Well, do you think that praying to a being whom your own reasoning tells you does not exist, puts your mind in some kind of tension? Thomas: Maybe it does, but I guess I can live with it. I guess I have a philosophical compartment and a religious one, and they do not really connect. Is that so bad? Prof: Are you saying that when you weigh up the costs and benefits of religion in your life, the costs of an incoherent set of beliefs is outweighed by the benefits of participation in religious life? Thomas: Yeah, I guess that's right. Prof: So, given your priorities, I would say you are acting rationally.

If we take rationality to require that each of us devote as much time and energy as needed to get all our beliefs in order and to hold only beliefs we can fully justify, then the demands of rationality will leave us with little time for anything else. But there is nothing about rationality, *per se*, that implies that. It is rational for us to revise our beliefs when the ones we hold get us into trouble — trouble in our interactions with the non-human world, with other humans, or with ourselves. As professional philosophers we have a cultivated sensitivity to even slight inconsistencies among our beliefs concerning philosophical matters. These can gnaw at us like a sore tooth. It is gratifying to us when a few of our students develop this sensitivity, but let us remember that failing to do so does not make students irrational.⁴

1. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 53.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. My thanks to Alan Sidelle for very helpful feedback on an earlier version of this essay, feedback on the basis of which I felt persuaded to modify my own view.