

The Value of Reason: Why Not a Sardine Can Opener?

Emily Robertson
Syracuse University

PREFACE

This essay has a history that is deeply rooted in the Philosophy of Education Society. In 1995, Harvey Siegel in his Presidential Address, “What Price Inclusion?” raised the question, “Why care about epistemology, justification, and rationality?” which amounted to asking why anyone should care about the whole set of philosophical concerns that lie at the heart of Harvey’s work.¹ He reported that Nick Burbules had urged him to address this question. Specifically, Nick advised Harvey to “resist the temptation to offer ‘yet another transcendental argument’” and to try instead to teach his critics why they should care about “his” issues. But Harvey confessed that, alas, he could not resist “the temptation to wax transcendental.” Since I, like Harvey, have written about rationality and education, Nick’s question stuck with me. I found myself trying to articulate my sense of why beliefs about truth, rationality, and so on, matter. I asked myself what is at stake, humanly, in work such as this and in the stance toward life and education it promotes. Some of these themes were addressed by Jim Macmillan in his PES Presidential Address, “Love and Logic in 1984.”² Jim had been my teacher at Temple University and I was his Program Chair. Many of us remember Jim fondly and miss his wisdom at these meetings. Probably fewer of us remember Paul Dietl, the PES member from whom Jim took the phrase “Love and Logic,” a phrase Jim frequently used as the closing in his correspondence. Paul, too, was my teacher, at Syracuse University. His early death at age forty left us all less wise than we would otherwise have been. Paul was fond of saying that love and logic summed up the requirements of a life worth living. And he frequently added, “Logic isn’t the whole of life, but don’t knock it either.” These men taught me why logic matters, not merely in the classroom but in the way they lived their lives. So this paper is for Paul and for Jim. I hope that it does not fall too far short of their exacting standards.

INTRODUCTION

In his *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, Umberto Eco ponders the alleged crisis of reason and asks what we are supposed to use in reason’s place: “feeling, delirium, poetry, mystical silence, a sardine can opener, the high jump, sex, intravenous injections of sympathetic ink?”³ Eco is puzzled by what Richard Bernstein has famously called “the rage against reason.”⁴ From the perspective of reason’s critics, those who insist on the vocabulary of rationality, truth, objectivity, to name a few, are at best “lovably old-fashioned prigs” and at worst authoritarian personalities unable to respect difference and complicitous with racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.⁵ Faced with such claims, defenders of rationality are perplexed by a demand to defend what they think is obvious. “That we should care about rationality goes without saying,” wrote Paul Horwich in a recent review.⁶ Attempts to deny rationality, truth, and so forth, are held to be self-contradictory. For example, Susan Haack writes, “One could not discover by honest inquiry that there is no such thing

as honest inquiry, that it could not be really-and-truly true that ‘truth’ is no more than ideological humbug.”⁷ Or, more colorfully, from Eco again: “What I continue to consider irrational is somebody’s insistence that, for instance, Desire always wins out over the *modus ponens*...but then...to confute my confutation, he tries to catch me in contradiction by using the *modus ponens*....I feel a Desire to bash him one.”⁸ And so the “debate” continues with about as much openness to mutual persuasion as the Republicans and Democrats showed in the recent impeachment hearings.

I take this debate seriously and count myself among reason’s defenders, as those of you who have heard me read other papers before this Society know. I agree with Jim McClellan’s remark that “[p]hilosophically speaking, like turtles, it is reason all the way down.”⁹ Yet I have increasingly had the feeling that these debates are not quite scratching where it itches. And so instead of engaging the debate directly by defending theories of rationality against their critics, I want to take a different approach. I would like to shift the focus from the distinctively philosophical issues of metaphysics and epistemology to the social practices of rational persuasion. I see the practices of rational persuasion as the social ground in which the normative concept of rationality is rooted. Further, I am less interested in analyzing the language game of rational persuasion, in describing “the ideal speech situation,” than I am in depicting the attitudes and perspective, the phenomenological stance, as I will call it, of those who see themselves as participants in this language game. My focus is on the attitudes that underpin the practices of rational persuasion. I agree with Ronald deSousa that rationality is “a teleological concept.”¹⁰ On the teleological conception, rational belief aims at truth, rational action at success, rational desire at the good, and so on, however these end states are defined.¹¹ I see the practices of rational persuasion as conversation oriented toward truth or another appropriate end state of rational inquiry. For the purposes of this essay, I have limited the focus to truth, but I think parallel arguments could be made for other goals of reason.

I am going to develop a phenomenology of participants in the practices of rational persuasion *negatively* by surveying some practices that strike me as alternatives to it. Physical force, for example, is an obvious alternative to rational persuasion, but there are discursive alternatives as well. While I will develop a catalog of such alternatives as part of my exposition, the usual caveats apply; I do not assume these alternatives exhaust the territory. The point of the survey is to discover what might be distinctive about the practices of rational persuasion in order to consider why one might value those features and the stance that embodies them. I agree with Eco that “the problem [the alleged crisis of reason] affects us not only at the level of learned debate, but also in daily behavior and political life.”¹² In short, it matters whether the practices of rational persuasion are fostered, practiced, and sustained. And insofar as the current intellectual zeitgeist obscures their significance, philosophical arguments directed against it have significant work to do.

I am not claiming — and this is an important point — that the alternatives I will propose to the practices of rational persuasion are necessarily *irrational*. They are forms of action that may well be rational in some circumstances. In this way, I am

hoping to relocate the debate about reason from the all-or-nothing choice described in the opening paragraphs to a debate about what choice of human relationship it is rational (sorry, I do not know how to avoid the word) to make on particular occasions. I have become persuaded that this may be what the debate is really about. I am hoping that my approach will generate conclusions that have validity whatever one's stand on a number of vexed metaphysical and epistemological issues, but I am not going to argue for that hope in this paper. But it is this hope that leads me to believe I can say something to those who genuinely ask "Why care?" without begging any questions or "waxing transcendental."

ALTERNATIVES TO THE STANCE OF RATIONAL PERSUASION

INTEREST GROUP POLITICS

The first alternative, which I call "interest group politics," is based on an experience I had that first led me to consider rationality from the perspective of the presuppositions of rational persuasion as a form of social interaction. The example also helps to illuminate what I take to be a fundamental characteristic of the phenomenological stance of those involved in these practices. In a faculty meeting where we were discussing which graduate students would get assistantships, one faculty member persisted in arguing for a student no one else supported. Finally another faculty member asked him, "Are you saying that X should get an assistantship because you believe it or because you want to be able to tell her that you did your best for her?" The jolt I felt when that question was asked, my quite visceral reaction that were he behaving that way it would be wrong, and that despite my colleague's apparent acceptance of such a strategy, made me analyze the phenomenology of my own stance in that situation. I, too, had students I worked with and wanted to support. But I was open to the possibility that someone else was more deserving, better qualified. In a phrase borrowed from Andrew Oldenquist, I was open to the possibility that I might be "obligated to lose." In a well-known paper on loyalty, Oldenquist writes: "We have every reason to try to find a basis for dialogue with the competitor, the Spartan, or the andromedan, for it supplements the possibility of winning by force or trickery with the possibility of winning (or cutting losses) by reasoning and persuasion. But it also adds the possibility of being obligated to lose."¹³ I was open to the possibility that I might lose, not because I was not powerful enough to have my way, but because I might be shown wrong; someone else's reasons might be better.

I thought when the incident happened, and still do, that it would have been unethical in that context to take the stance my colleague implied. But I have to acknowledge that I do not always find it as problematic. We are not unfamiliar with the member of Congress whose speech on the House floor is really aimed at the folks back home. And I myself as a department chair was unwilling to risk incurring an obligation to lose in a discussion in the Dean's Cabinet with other chairs when the topic was whose program should be cut. To reiterate an earlier point, I am not claiming that interest group politics is irrational. I am claiming that the phenomenological stance of a participant in such political negotiations is different from the stance of a participant in the social practices of rational persuasion. The jolt I felt on

hearing my colleague's remark made me conscious of my own understandings, and aware that they were possibly not shared, that I might not have understood what was going on. In general, participants in interest group politics are unwilling, on the key issues at least, to risk incurring an obligation to lose. On those points, they are not open to rational persuasion.

What does it mean to say that one might possibly be *obligated* to lose? The notion of "obligation" emphasizes the normative and social content of rationality. Persons who recognize that they might be obliged to lose have accepted communal norms for determining what it is permissible to rationally believe in the situation.¹⁴ They are open to the possibility of being shown wrong in light of those norms. They hold their beliefs "evidentially" in the sense developed by Thomas Green.¹⁵ More fundamentally, to accept the possibility of being obligated to lose is to believe that "truth" is an intelligible concept and that truth is independent of at least one's own beliefs. That is why it makes sense to suppose that you might discover you were wrong, might be obligated to lose.

There is a second feature of the contrast in attitudes between interest group politics and rational persuasion. Rational persuasion requires treating others as participants rather than as things to be managed or manipulated. There is a difference between using other's words as signs of their states of mind or clues to how they can be brought to share your views and treating them as staking their own "claim[s] to truth," to use Gadamer's expression. In contrast, the attitude toward other parties to the conversation of one whose interests do not permit risking the obligation to lose is akin to what Strawson called the "objective attitude":

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him...as a subject for what...might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled...But it cannot include the range of reactive feelings and attitudes which belong to involvement or participation with others in inter-personal human relationships. ...If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, then though you may fight him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him. You can at most pretend to quarrel, or to reason, with him.¹⁶

Rational persuasion requires treating others as participants.

MEDIATION AND DIPLOMACY

A second example of a social practice alternative to rational persuasion grew out of another experience of having my assumptions about what was happening disrupted. A few years ago, for the first time in twelve years of schooling, my husband and I found ourselves invited to a conference in the principal's office to discuss a dispute between our daughter and one of her teachers. I will not bore you with the details except to make absolutely plain that it was not our daughter Rachel's fault! At any rate, at an early point in the discussion when Rachel began to dispute her teacher's account of what had happened, the principal said, "We're not here to decide the truth, we're here to learn each other's perceptions." In that moment I had to decide what I wanted from the meeting: uncovering the truth about what had happened (that is, seeing Rachel vindicated from every flaw) *or*, what I immediately understood the principal to be aiming at, namely, figuring out a way that Rachel and

her teacher could continue their relationship. I imagine that high level diplomacy can be a lot like that, that it is not devoted to rationally persuading each other of the truth of the matter, but to figuring out a way to go on, to live with each other in some semblance of peace and harmony.

Perhaps, it has occurred to me, some disputes between the supporters of rationality and its critics involve their taking these different stances. For example, Anne Seller writes from a feminist perspective on the political implications of a commitment to realism or relativism. She says:

Knowledge tells us how to make sense of the world, how to adapt to it, what demands realistically to make of it. It tells us what is there. Politics too is trying to make sense, to live with, adapt to....But...the knowledge of what peace and equality are [is not] something that can be bumped into by an individual with a map and compass....What peace and equality are discovered to be will depend on the decisions that various communities have taken. Through our decisions with a community, we decide how we want to belong to the world, how we want to set about understanding it, living in it and changing it. We have nothing else to rely upon except each other in taking those decisions.¹⁷

Unlike interest group politics, mediation does not involve covert rejection of the possibility of being shown wrong, but it does accord the search for truth a lesser role in the exchange. The alternative of mediation points out that while truth is a good, it is not necessarily one that trumps all other goods in all circumstances. As my colleague Tom Green sometimes puts it, if it really is true that the heavens may fall from our pursuit of truth, maybe we should reconsider. So there is a question about when truth matters and why it matters. To choose the stance of rational persuasion in a specific context is to accord greater weight to truth in those circumstances than to other competing goods.¹⁸

DISRUPTION

Disruption as a stance was exhibited in a fascinating recent article by Jeffery Rosen in *The New Yorker* about the increasing frequency of hung juries. One woman hung a jury in what appeared to be an open and shut case. An off-duty policeman was a witness to a shooting incident between rival gangs. He arrested the shooter and recovered the weapon. The policeman, the defendant, and half the jury were African-American. The lone holdout was a young black woman studying to be a law librarian. Her cousin had been killed by the police, she said. She found herself unable to pass judgment. She said God told her that He had forgiven the defendant. The other members of the jury angrily confronted her, but she would not yield. Although this woman's action seemed more like a visceral response than a calculated strategy, Rosen notes that Paul Butler, an African-American legal scholar, recommends that "black jurors . . . free guilty black defendants as a form of political protest and of black self-help." In cases where long sentences would be imposed on young black men for non-violent drug possession, juries are more frequently taking his advice.¹⁹

I have argued that being willing to run the risk that one might be obligated to lose involves an attitude of acceptance of communal norms that determine what is rationally permitted in the circumstances. Disruption is the stance of someone who refuses to endorse the local norms of rationality. One who takes this stance refuses to be a participant in a game one believes is rigged. Disruption can be both a practical and a theoretical stance. For example, Elizabeth Gross writes: "feminist theory...is

not a true discourse...It could be appropriately seen, rather, as a *strategy*...[an] intervention with definite political...aims...intellectual guerilla warfare."²⁰ Hence adopting the stance of rational persuasion involves implicit acceptance of the communal norms as *prima facie* fair.

For the reasons I have suggested, I am focusing my analysis on alternative stances rooted in ordinary life. However, it may be worth mentioning here a form of disruption that grows out of postmodern theoretical stances because it reveals another dimension of the stance of rational persuasion. I am thinking of Lyotard's "paralogy" and Rorty's "irony" or "edification."²¹ What is the point of these practices? Discussing the practice of edification, Rorty points to "a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things."²² Understood as creating new moves, edification and related practices could be understood as compatible with the stance of rational persuasion, as creating new theories or criticizing traditional methods and standards, as consistent with the constant effort to improve the standards of rationality themselves. But Rorty suggests another possibility: "playfulness." "The ironic, playful intellectual is a desirable character-type," he says.²³ Understood in this way, the practice seems to be a form of disruption, but not necessarily with resistance to injustice as its aim. Perhaps the point is to keep us off balance, to make us less sure of the course we have taken, to keep the options open.

I leave open the question of whether this form of disruption is simply a game some intellectuals play or whether it is (or can be) embodied in ordinary life practices. What does it is possibility reveal about the practices of rational persuasion? One possibility is that those who fixate on rational persuasion are rigid personalities, useful if you want to solve a problem, but not much fun at a party. But one need not be fixated to defend the desirability of rational persuasion in at least some contexts. However, I do think that adopting the stance of rational persuasion reveals a certain seriousness, an engagement in the situation, rather than the detached stance of the ironist.

LOVE, LOYALTY, AND IDENTITY POLITICS

As Jim Macmillan acknowledged in his slogan, there is love as well as logic. More generally, there are the *Gemeinschaft* bonds of shared history, racial and ethnic identity, nationality, and religion. There are many accounts of the differences between these forms of relationship and what I am calling the stance of rational persuasion. As traditionally conceived, they are misfits to the list I am constructing because they are in Tonnies's vocabulary, "found" not "willed."²⁴ Traditionally, they are not a self-consciously chosen "stance" in the way in which interest group politics or mediation might be. Nor are they primarily *discursive* alternatives of the sort I have been considering. But leaving them out would be clearly short-sighted, since the postmodern reappropriation of these markers of identity through the politics of recognition *is* such a stance and initiates a discursive alternative. For example, K. Anthony Appiah says of pan-African identity that it must be acknowledged that "race and history and metaphysics do not enforce an identity...we must choose, within broad limits set by ecological, political, and economic realities, what

it will mean to be African in the coming years.”²⁵

For Appiah, the challenge to rational persuasion and truth-telling that identity construction presents concerns whether the crafting of politically potent alliances requires the “noble lie.” He argues, for example, that theoretical arguments establishing the nonexistence of race as a biological category are not sufficient for political purposes. One would need to show as well “that they are useless falsehoods at best or dangerous ones at worst: that another set of stories will build us identities through which we can make more productive alliances.” Further, such group identities work best when they are taken to be real or natural, he believes. A full recognition of their invented character seems to work against taking them seriously. Hence one “cannot build alliances without mystifications and mythologies.” While in this particular case, Appiah thinks, happily, that one does not have to choose between the truth (that is, that race has no biological reality) and political utility, the possibility of conflict remains a live one. This means, Appiah thinks, that “there is...no large place for reason in the construction...of identities. One temptation, then, for those who see the centrality of these fictions in our lives, is to leave reason behind: to celebrate and endorse those identities that seem at the moment to offer the best hope of advancing our other goals, and to keep silence about the lies and the myths.”²⁶

The Enlightenment valorization of reason required rational justification of particularist sentiments such as patriotism, religion, and racial and ethnic identity. Enlightenment rationalism came to be identified with a commitment to the possibility of universal truth and norms of impartiality and objectivity. Relationships of love and loyalty as potential sources of bias and partiality were thus thought hostile to the rational pursuit of truth.²⁷ It is not clear to me, however, to what extent these Enlightenment commitments are necessary features of the stance of rational persuasion that we have been considering. In a particular conversation in which the participants take the stance of rational persuasion, the norms of rationality appealed to could be local, as in theological debate about what it is right for those of our faith to acknowledge. And in such debates, religious commitments, far from being eliminable as a source of bias, are a necessary condition of the debate’s having point. So phenomenologically, what *is* the difference between regarding oneself as in a discussion oriented toward truth and foregrounding the thought that this is one’s beloved (or one’s brother or sister in either a literal or extended sense)?

Once, in the midst of my attempt at rational persuasion, a former partner shouted at me “you are the most rational person I know.” It was not a compliment. The comment initiated a phenomenological change in me. I suddenly realized that what he wanted from me in that moment was my attention, my support, my endorsement of his belief that he had been wronged — in short, my solidarity with him. The truth and a rational plan of action could wait.

Richard Rorty describes solidarity as a way people have of making sense of their lives by “telling the story of their contribution to a community.”²⁸ He contrasts the desire for solidarity with the desire for objectivity, understood as the pursuit of Truth, with a capital “T,” but the tradition of truth-seeking he refers to carries more

metaphysical baggage than the homey stance of rational persuasion we are considering. Nevertheless, there is some commitment to objectivity involved in rational persuasion; if the truth were not something taken to be independent of one's own belief, what meaning could be given to the thought that one might have an obligation to lose? Solidarity is based on the perception of shared bonds with others, whether these bonds are taken as given and natural or constructed for the occasion. Rational persuasion aims at assent to an outcome because, based on the available reasons and the relevant norms of rationality, it is the outcome most likely to be true or good or beautiful, not because it is necessarily our way of doing things or that it is the most politically effective course given our interests or that it celebrates and affirms the bonds of our relationship. (The commitment of rational persuasion to objectivity and the conversational pressures to agreement that rational persuasion exerts are made clearer in the discussion of our final alternative.)²⁹

Retreat. The last alternative I will consider is the "just say no" alternative of retreat. In her well-known essay, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Linda Alcoff discusses Joyce Trebilcot's renunciation of the practice of speaking for others in the lesbian feminist community. Trebilcot says that she "'will not try to get other wimmin to accept my beliefs in place of their own' on the grounds that to do so would be to practice a kind of discursive coercion and even a violence."³⁰ Alcoff argues that this kind of retreat is not a possible stance. Alcoff notes that "when I speak for myself, I am constructing a possible self, a way to be in the world, and, whether I intend to or not, I am offering that to others, as one possible way to be."³¹

Rational persuasion involves willingness to be responsible for making changes in others and a knowing acceptance of that responsibility. While even an "offering" runs the risk of changing others if Alcoff is correct, the stance of rational persuasion makes such changes intentional. Allan Gibbard argues that to call a belief "rational" is to make "a conversational demand... that the audience accept what... [one] says, that it share the state of mind [one] expresses."³² I assume that it was the making of such demands that Trebilcot regarded as a form of violence and thus sought to avoid. While leading one's own life or stating one's own beliefs may lead others to entertain those actions or beliefs as *possibilities* for themselves, it does not necessarily seem to make a *demand* on them in the way that an attempt at rational persuasion does. So is Trebilcot right after all? Does rational persuasion involve making coercive conversational demands?

I agree that there is a normative element in the stance of rational persuasion, but I do not think that prescriptive demands are the best way to capture that element. Recall that the stance of rational persuasion requires each participant to be similarly open to rational persuasion from the other participants. This is another way of noting that those taking the stance of rational persuasion must acknowledge that they might be obligated to lose. The demand is thus not an interpersonal demand but one that stems from the reasons and norms that are judged relevant to the case at hand. The "demand" stems from the objectivity claimed for the judgment in question, not from personal "browbeating."³³ Only if the norms and reasons invoked are arbitrary and unrelated to the issue at hand might they properly be regarded as coercive constraints. That was the possibility we considered in the discussion of disruption.

Absent those circumstances, while one taking the stance of rational persuasion does aim at getting others to accept his or her beliefs “in place of their own,” they do so because they believe these are the beliefs best supported by the evidence not in order to exercise personal power.

WHY CARE?

What have we learned about the dispositions at the root of the social practices of rational persuasion from canvassing the alternatives? (1) First there’s the openness to the possibility of being *obligated* to lose. The notion of “obligation” emphasizes the normative content of rationality. Persons who recognize that they might be obliged to lose have accepted communal norms for determining what it is permissible to believe in the situation. They are open to the possibility of being shown wrong in light of those norms. They hold their beliefs “evidentially.” (2) To enter such discussions is to have a concern for truth and, in the particular context, to value truth more highly than competing goods, such as harmony or solidarity. (3) Rational persuasion requires treating others as participants rather than as things to be managed, or manipulated. (4) It is a stance that requires accepting the fairness of relevant norms of rationality. (5) It is an engaged attitude of seriousness, not one of ironic detachment. (6) It involves a commitment to truth as independent of one’s individual belief; in this sense, it expresses a commitment to the belief’s objectivity. (7) It involves accepting responsibility for making changes in others through efforts to persuade them to share one’s beliefs.

The possibilities we have canvassed also remind us that there are local alternatives to the stance of rational persuasion. While I would argue that there is no possibility of wholesale rejection of rationality, there are choices in particular environments. The global arguments, then, seem to me sometimes futile. We might be better served by asking what the right stance is to take here and now. Are the rules fair, or reasonably so, or is the game rigged? Is knowing the truth in this context more important than obtaining other competing goods? And, of course, part of the paradox is that these questions must be rationally entertained. This is why there is no global alternative, no possibility of substituting “sardine can openers” for reason. But the stance of rational persuasion would not be the issue it is if there were not the possibility of adopting alternative stances in particular cases. Those who endorse rationality as an educational ideal may have sometimes given the impression that every instance of adopting alternative practices is a failure. But I have argued that at a practical level, this cannot be right. The serious arguments, rationally conducted I hope, are about when adopting the stance of rational persuasion makes sense.

Some of you may suspect that in making my case I have helped myself to a set of distinctions the critics deny. For example, Rorty sees no distinction between aiming at truth and the attempt to arrive at agreement.³⁴ If so, there would be no difference between negotiation or mediation and discourse oriented toward truth. So have I smuggled in philosophical content here?

I think my account of the differences in our subjective attitudes among these stances shows there is a distinction in ordinary life between the stance of rational persuasion and the alternatives. I have presented my account as a phenomenology

of everyday life practices in the hope that all of us could recognize ourselves in my discovery that when I was engaged in rational debate others had other ends in mind. I do not suppose that this phenomenology constitutes an epistemic or metaphysical argument. But I do think it shows that concepts of reason, truth, objectivity, have a basis in ordinary life practices. Perhaps these everyday attitudes are based on an illusion, a naive realism, for example, that Derrida claims is the metaphysics of the West. Thus the academic engagement of questions of metaphysics and epistemology have a point. Nevertheless, the critics owe us an account of how we could modify our form of life so as to incorporate their insights. Really to adopt as a global perspective the stances that various critics of reason recommend, if it could be done, would be to alter the human world in far-reaching ways.

Why value the stance of rational persuasion? Does it appeal only to us “lovably old-fashioned prigs?” If we understand rationality, as I proposed at the beginning of this essay, as a teleological concept, then to abandon rationality entirely would require either rejection of the goals of rationality (truth, strategic success of action, a good life) or extreme skepticism about the claims of any forms of judgment (any traditions of reason) to be better ways of reaching these goals, than, say, flipping a coin. (Of course we can criticize particular traditions of how to achieve rationality in belief, desire, or action, but that requires commitment to rational thought rather than its abandonment.) Total abandonment does not seem like a live option — can we replace reason with a sardine can opener and still achieve our goals? But it is not the epistemic merits of rationality that I have focused on here. I have been concerned to reveal the phenomenological stance of those engaged in the practices of rational persuasion when compared with alternative stances. I think this stance embodies a moral ideal. It involves opening one’s own beliefs to the independent evaluation and judgment of another. It means revealing the reasons for one’s beliefs and inviting others to share them. The idea that the truth of the matter at hand may be independent of the beliefs of any of the parties to the conversation poses the possibility of converging on the truth with whatever resources we have. This idea transforms the debate into joint inquiry rather than the imposition of one will on another. So the practices of rational persuasion are worth caring for if these forms of human relationship are worth caring for and if truth matters.

Some who might not disagree that the stance of rational persuasion is possible still doubt its effectiveness and desirability, however. Audrey Thompson, for example, with tongue in cheek but also with some seriousness, I think, suggests that those like us with a taste for argument are hopelessly out of touch: the “devotion to argumentation...is...an embarrassingly *passee* sartorial taste that makes *you* feel comfortable and maybe even classy but from which everyone else averts their eyes and ears.”³⁵ She points to the phenomenon I suspect we have all experienced when in a college committee meeting you say exactly the right thing, complete with sound supporting arguments, but everyone just stares at you for a moment and proceeds with the discussion as if you had never spoken. On my analysis, this response means we have not understood what stance the participants are taking; some other game is being played.

But Thompson has a stronger challenge. She writes:

Rational argumentation works for intellectuals in a way that it doesn't and can't for everyone else because it specifically leaves behind — claiming to supersede — everything associated with passion, bodies, desire, interest, investment, and contingency (meaning things like people's actual lives)... It works insofar as it is elite, rarefied, specialized, and transcendent. In a sense, argumentation is a counter-discourse... for those who want to rise above the errors and messy human involvements of relationships, popular culture, and popular politics. Yet if you strip ideas of their investments and passions, you strip them of their interest and significance; and if you claim universality for them, instead of acknowledging their investments, you lie about them. (It's striking how regularly rational arguments are used to not-listen, to perform sleights of hand, to deny privilege, and to lie).³⁶

Does my analysis offer any resources for responding to this challenge? I doubt whether “offering a rational argument” always involves taking the stance of rational persuasion. I do not doubt that arguments can be used as weapons to fend off the opposition rather than risking incurring an obligation to lose. And I agree that nothing in the stance of rational persuasion itself somehow guarantees that participants will be free of bias, not self-deluded, somehow liberated from competing motivations. But I am not clear why Thompson thinks (if she does) that we cannot try to persuade each other rationally about the things that matter in our lives. For example, while resistance to racism is not simply a matter of truth-telling, truth-telling can be helpful. As Appiah says, “We cannot change the world simply by evidence and reasoning, but we surely cannot change it without them either.”³⁷

For me, the stance of rational persuasion is at the core of what universities are about. It is not that we cannot recognize that there are other values. I do not deny the need for negotiation, disruption, even, under extreme conditions, guerrilla warfare. The choices are hard and context dependent. But I believe that as university faculty we are particularly entrusted with passing on, with exemplifying, the stance of rational persuasion. The criticism of particular traditions of reason in reason's name, the unmasking of political interests masquerading as objective truth is an extremely valuable contribution to our common enterprise. But from my perspective to reject the form of life that this unmasking is in the interest of is to destroy our special reason for being. Some have suggested that this interest in argument is just the peculiar interest of some Western intellectuals. I have tried to show that the interest is rooted in ordinary life, that it's rejection, if at all possible (and I think it's not) would require substantial alteration in how we interact with each other, would require the demise of a way of being that, setting aside its instrumental cognitive value, embodies a moral ideal that has rightly inspired many. Of course, nothing I have done here today shows that these social practices do not rest on mistaken philosophical assumptions. And so the philosophical labor invested in the analysis of these assumptions has value. But the debates about rationality are not simply “learned debates” but also have meaning in “daily behavior and political life.”³⁸ They involve fundamental choices about the character of human relationships in particular circumstances.

This essay has been in many ways a personal statement, rather unlike the papers I have typically read before this society. (But, hey, if you cannot seize the bully pulpit when you are president, then when?) Once long ago I underwent a series of tests as

part of an opportunity to explore various career options. The psychologist who wrote the final report said of me: "You try always to state the exact truth as you see it; thus you are likely to be misunderstood by most people for whom truth is only one aspect of reality." In this essay I have tried to consider what some of the other aspects are and to understand why they might be chosen as alternatives to the pursuit of truth on particular occasions. But most of all I have been concerned to understand and defend the value of the form of life involved in attempts at rational persuasion. Thus I end where I began with Eco by joining in solidarity with him to offer a "limited *viva* for *modus ponens*."³⁹

-
1. Harvey Siegel, "What Price Inclusion?" In *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 1-22.
 2. C.J.B. Macmillan, "Love and Logic in 1984," in *Philosophy of Education 1984*, ed. Emily E. Robertson (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1985), 3-16.
 3. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, trans. W. Weaver (London: Picador, 1987), 125.
 4. Richard Bernstein, "The Rage Against Reason," in *Construction and Constraint: The Shaping of Scientific Rationality*, ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 216.
 5. The quotation is from Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 86. As quoted in Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.
 6. Paul Horwich, "Gibbard's Theory of Norms," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22, (1993): 67.
 7. Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, 147.
 8. Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, 131.
 9. James E. McClellan, Jr., "Margonis's Challenge," in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 375.
 10. Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 163.
 11. Embedded in the concept of rational judgment is the assumption that some ways of forming beliefs or deciding how to act or what ends to seek are more likely to meet with success than are others. The modes of judgment and the reasons they provide are not properly thought of as *merely* instrumental means to their ends, however, but must recommend the belief or action in question: rationality is a normative concept. See Roderick Firth, "Epistemic Merit, Intrinsic and Instrumental," in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Society* 55 (1981), 5-23. See also J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), especially chap. 7.
 12. Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, 131-32.
 13. Andrew Oldenquist, "Loyalties," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (April 1982): 183.
 14. Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7.
 15. See Thomas F. Green, *Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), chap. 3.
 16. P.F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 9.
 17. Anne Seller, "Realism versus Relativism" in *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*, ed. Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 180. I do not think Seller is exactly right here. There may be things we need to know about the world in order to work out relations of peace and equality. I am enough of a Deweyan to think that even ethical concepts need to be modified in light of the experiences produced by living under them; it is not simply a matter of our "social constructions." The questions here can be extremely difficult. For example, after a brutal and repressive regime has ended, do we need to know who committed what crimes even if we decide not to punish the offenders?

18. Interest group politics and mediation can be viewed as aspects of participation in a democratic form of political life. While consideration of the stance of democratic participation does not appear to reveal new aspects of the stance of rational persuasion, it does raise questions about the role of the latter with respect to the former. Both reason's friends and reason's foes claim their epistemological/metaphysical position is friendly to democracy. Dewey, famously, saw affinities between rational inquiry as modeled by the scientific community and democratic social relations. But Rorty, while championing solidarity over objectivity, finds his own brand of pragmatism especially hospitable to democracy. He writes: "We pragmatists commend our antiessentialism and antigocentrism on the ground of its harmony with the practices and aims of a democratic society." See Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 135. What role should rational persuasion play in maintaining democratic traditions? Certainly there is a difference between being outvoted and being wrong, between losing in a fair, democratic decision-making process and discovering one has an obligation to lose. It's the difference between the stance of rational persuasion and the alternatives that is the focus of this analysis. When the stance of rational persuasion should be adopted is a difficult pragmatic question.

19. Jeffrey Rosen, "Annals of Justice: One Angry Woman," *The New Yorker*, 24 February and 3 March 1997, 54-64.

20. Elizabeth Gross [now Grosz], "What is Feminist Theory?" in *Feminist Challenges*, ed. Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 177.

21. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

22. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 9.

23. Richard Rorty, "Freud and Moral Reflection," in *Pragmatism's Freud*, ed. J.H. Smith and W. Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 15.

24. See Robert A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), chap. 3.

25. K. Anthony Appiah, "The Limits of Pluralism," in *Multiculturalism and American Democracy*, ed. Arthur M. Melzer *et al.* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 41.

26. *Ibid.*, 40, 44.

27. See Andrew Oldenquist, "Loyalties." See also Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-73.

28. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *From Modernism to Postmodernism, An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 573. (Originally published in Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21-34.)

29. We might connect the stance of loyalty with our earlier discussion of interest group politics. In the section on interest group politics, I considered the relationship between a representative of the relevant group and those regarded as outsiders. In that case, no openness to losing was possible on the key issues. Loyalty becomes like interest group politics when considering conversation outside the group. In this section, I have been considering what the in-group relationship is like. Here I think the possibilities are more complex. In-group conversation can be a form of rational persuasion in which the features that bind the group together are given substantial weight. (My earlier reference to theological debate within a religious group is an example.) Here the loyalty lies in establishing what counts as a reason. Or it may be that membership in the group is made a requirement of participation in the conversation because only with those who are "one of us" is it possible to have a fully open debate. But there is also the mode of relationship, the stance, in which it is the fact of the bond itself which takes priority. It is here that the contrast with the stance of rational persuasion is clearest.

30. Joyce Trebilcot, "Dyke Methods," in *Lesbian Philosophies and Culture*, ed. Jeffner Allen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 15-29. As quoted in Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," in *Feminist Nightmares: Women at Odds*, ed. Susan Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 186.

31. Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," 186.

32. Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 172.

33. Ibid., 193.

34. See Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?"

35. Audrey Thompson, "A Modest Proposal for Preventing Philosophers of Education from Being a Burden to their Students or Their Country; and for Making Them Beneficial to Their Publick," *Educational Foundations* 12, no. 3 (1998), 68. See also Scott H. Bilow, "Rationality Overrated?" in *Philosophy of Education 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 486-90.

36. Ibid., 70.

37. Appiah, "The Limits of Pluralism," 45.

38. Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, 131-32.

39. Ibid., 132.