

Who Thinks Like This?

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Contrasting black and white ways of thinking, a ninety-year-old black man told anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney that white people do not rely much on street sense. “White people like to have books for everything,” he said. “Don’t you find it amazing that the Watergate people wrote down everything they did and even went so far as to record their unlawfulness? I really can’t understand that kind of mind. You couldn’t pay black criminals to do that.”¹

There are people who consider the way that philosophers think equally odd. While I was staying with my niece and nephew last year, it occurred to my nephew Tommy to ask why I spent so much time reading and writing. Explaining that I am a teacher and a philosopher, I told him, “I have to study.” Tommy was familiar with the word “philosophy” — I had been slipping it into his spelling list from time to time — but he didn’t know what it meant, so he asked what it is that philosophers teach. My attempt to make philosophy of education intelligible to a fourth grader was apparently unsuccessful, because Tommy asked, “What is it *for*, though? Does it help you *do* anything?” I assured him that it did. “It helps people to think more clearly and carefully,” I said. “And they *pay* you for that?” he asked with interest.

In telling Tommy that people like me get paid for doing philosophy of education, I skipped lightly over the question of how *willingly* they pay. I think it would be an exaggeration to say that people are falling all over themselves to pay us to teach them to think clearly. And even people who are in fact glad to pay for intellectual clarification are shocked when they find out what exactly counts as clarity in academia. Recently a student who had read a piece of mine on the history of women and education told me that when she read the article, she had not initially registered that she knew its author, and her first impression was that she could hardly imagine who the author could be. As she put it, she found herself thinking, “But this is so *logical*. Who *thinks* like this?”

Not only do philosophers of education and other academics think like that, but we think we *ought* to think like that — and that our students ought to, too. Summing up a position that many of us would endorse, Emily Robertson says that “as university faculty we are particularly entrusted with passing on, with exemplifying, the stance of rational persuasion.” As an intellectual and a progressive teacher educator, I am drawn to this commitment. I would like to think that fostering an intellectual orientation in the classroom would help teachers think more carefully, more clearly, and more generously, that it would encourage teachers and students to stay with difficult questions rather than abandoning them once a comfortable outcome is assured, and, above all, perhaps, that it would provide a context in which we could think about truths that do not seem to be *our* truths.

Do the tools of rationality work in the same ways for everyone, however? Although I would agree with Robertson that “everyday life practices” ground

rationality as an ideal, I think we need to ask *whose* everyday life practices. Who thinks like this? And whose interests are served by the practices that we have come to recognize as persuasive? The question, as I see it, is not what those of us engaged in rational practices are *trying* to do, but what we are actually *doing*. In other words, we need to look phenomenologically not at why we engage in rational practices but at the consequences and costs of doing so.

Robertson's phenomenological account of rationality is richly engaging and it makes an important contribution to our understanding of how rational persuasion differs from other "games" that appear to undertake a commitment to reason and truth while covertly refusing to undertake any "obligation to lose." I also appreciate her limited endorsement of rationality, which I understand as an appeal to rational terms of engagement insofar as people can *afford* to be engaged rationally. On this account, we do not insist on imposing a decontextualized ideal on those who might be specifically disadvantaged by that ideal — as when, for example, "some other game is being played." But while Robertson's analysis acknowledges that there are times when a commitment to truth cannot take precedence over other commitments, it assumes that the way to get at truth is always through reason. When knowing the truth *is* our objective, the means of getting at truth remain those of offering reasoned arguments, determining relevant principles, presenting evidence, and weighing counter claims.

I want to discuss two problems with this assumption. First, in aligning a particular method of meaning-making with meaning itself, it reifies that method as the only access to "truth." One result is that meanings that are not human-constructed are ignored. Although rational discourse is intended to show respect for arguments, ideas, and persons, it is not intended to respect "nature" or "the weather." Nor, in fact, does it respect all human-constructed meanings. If particular humans cannot or will not frame their claims to consideration in rational terms, those claims may be set aside. Alternatively, they may be represented *for* them by others. When, for example, American Indians resist framing meaning in terms of principles and evidence, Anglos may be tempted to "help" them by deriving principles from what they do say.

Anthropologist Mary Black-Rogers testifies to how the insistence on forcing non-argument-based meanings into a rational framework may do violence to them and to the relationships in which those meanings are embedded. While working with a "patient 70-year-old" Ojibwa man who had consented to teach her about the concept "power" as used in the Ojibwa language, Black-Rogers began to feel that her project was being derailed by his digression into a long, rather obscure story. The story, it seemed to her, was "'totally irrelevant' to our work." She summarizes his story as follows:

There was a man once who said that the thunder was just made by big stones rolling together, and that there was really nothing up there. That man was in the building that was struck by lightning that night, and he was killed.²

Having told the story, her teacher repeated the ending several times. In an attempt to achieve closure and to draw a principle from the story, Black-Rogers asked him,

“Was this man disrespectful to say it was stones rolling?” The very asking of the question demonstrated to her teacher that she had failed to grasp the meaning of the story, so he repeated the entire story, ending by saying, “People don’t usually talk that way, and HE GOT KILLED.”³ His “point” — although in translating his meaning into academic terms I do violence to it — was that it was dangerous for her to be talking about the things she was talking about. Asking direct questions about nature out of the proper ceremonial contexts, he was telling her, is showing disrespect to the powers of nature. Yet abstracting from “merely” ceremonial contexts is one of the things that rational discourse is specifically intended to do.

The reification of rational (or, more generally, academic) discourse as the only avenue to truth, then, is one concern I would raise to even limited claims about the status of arguments and evidence. A second concern is that the appeal to reason or reasons may mask the problematic character of the commitments that *count* as reasons. A few weeks ago, Ann Landers printed a rules-to-live-by list sent in by one of her readers. One of the items listed was “Call your mother.” (It occurred to me that the list had in fact been sent in *by* my mother, but if that had been the case there wouldn’t have been anything else on the list.) The pithiness of that item struck me. There were no reasons given and, presumably, no excuses accepted. For my own mother, there would be no need for reasons: the “call your mother” rule is grounded in what her family means to her and what she means to us. No “reasons” could capture why we should call.

When we do not call often enough (which is most of the time), she may *give* us reasons to call, but they are reasons that, under the terms of rational discourse, have limited persuasive power — things like, “Remember, I breast fed you.” My own reasons for *not* calling, on the other hand, sound eminently reasonable: “I have a publishing deadline,” “I’m grading student midterms,” “I’m swamped with proposals I have to read by next week,” “I have all kinds of committee work that I’m already behind on,” “I promised to read a colleague’s essay and give her feedback.” To me, those seem like pressing reasons not to call; to my mother, they sound like ways to refuse to acknowledge her. As *arguments* (rather than occasional excuses), they work to silence her. In effect, they say, “I *can*’t call, so you can’t expect me to call.” Although she nevertheless does expect me to call, she doesn’t have a way to frame that expectation persuasively. Her reasons are embedded in a relationship; mine are framed as knock-down arguments. But the framing of my reasons as “objective” reasons obscures the fact that they are *choices* more than they are reasons: I keep choosing to live the kind of life in which my academic commitments come first.

Not only do academic forms of meaning-making usually not reach non-academics where they live, but (despite our good intentions) they may allow those of us who are academics to ignore the degree to which “where *we* live” is a kind of fortress built by reasons — reasons that may be forms of defensiveness. Among the things reasons may be defending are personal preferences, privileges we have gotten used to, and commitments we do not want to examine too closely. I do not mean to say that there is no value to rational arguments, explanations, and evidence. Like Emily Robertson, I would recognize a restricted but useful status for the practices

of rationality. In particular contexts, argumentation, categorization, and analysis may all be useful. For example, they tend to serve academics quite nicely. As a kind of rarified lingua franca — more or less on the model of Esperanto — the discourse of rationality enables those of us who know the language to communicate with one another. Beyond — and even within — the confines of academia, though, the claims to be made for rational practices seem to me more modest than Robertson has suggested. Such practices allow us to communicate with one another when we already agree about what is important or relevant. However, they cannot teach us about the many *other* things that are important but that go unrecognized under the terms of rational evidence and argumentation.

If we are to think about the rest of what is — or could become — important, we need to learn from people who do not “think like this.” This is not an issue just for philosophers: it is something that historians, anthropologists, medical doctors, and any number of other academic and scientific “experts” need to address. If we always translate what other people have to say into our own terms, we risk reinscribing the racist and otherwise oppressive or exclusionary categories that organize how we think. As one of his informants said to Gwaltney, “I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger.”⁴ To avoid reframing such statements in anthropological terms, Gwaltney simply recorded what his informants (who were mostly his family, friends, and neighbors) told him. But registering other voices is only a first step towards understanding them. We also have to learn *how* to listen to them. You can call your mother — and probably you should — but will you understand her when you do?

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1. John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 100.

2. Mary Black-Rogers, “Ojibwa Power Interactions: Creating Contexts for ‘Respectful Talk,’” in *Native North American Interaction Patterns*, ed. Regna Darnell and Michael K. Foster (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization/National Museums of Canada, 1988), 48.

3. *Ibid.*, 49.

4. Gwaltney, *Drylongso*, xix.