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Commentary on Menashe Schwed's "A Wittgensteinian Approach to Rationality in Argumentation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Schwed takes as his starting point the culture-ladenness of argumentation. He observes three senses in which the concepts of "argument" and "argumentation" are dependent on culture. Firstly, the anthropological: different societies employ different argumentational practices to different ends. They make different assumptions about what arguments are, how and when they should be deployed, and when they succeed. Secondly, the sub-cultural: within any society, most conspicuously our own, there are different groups with different ideas about argument, such as lawyers, doctors, politicians, scientists, and so forth. Thirdly, the theoretical: different argumentation theorists have different ideas about the nature of their subject, and draw upon resources from many contrasting disciplinary traditions. (One initial observation is that, if anything, Professor Schwed understates the problem. There are many other factors upon which our argumentational concepts may depend. For example: language, innate cognitive structures, gender, or our own personal choices (Swoyer 2003, §3).) This welter of confusion lends credence to a sceptical thesis: *there are no culturally independent standards of argument appraisal*. Two obvious, but equally unattractive, responses to such scepticism present themselves. In the most general terms: (a) Pretend everything is O.K.; (b) Give up. As Professor Schwed puts it, these are

the alternatives of continuing the search for universally justified standards for rationality and truth on the one hand, and [...] no hope for any sense for the concepts of rationality and truth on the other (p. 10).

He suggests that Wittgenstein offers us a way to pass between the horns of this dilemma.

However, there is some scope for confusion as to the exact location of these horns, and thereby what it would mean to pass between them. Professor Schwed describes the choice in different words at several different places in his paper. So, in addition to the passage just quoted, we are variously told that the choice is "between

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rationalism and nihilism” (p. 10), between “the unattainable concept of rationality on the one hand with the rhetoric of arguments from an audience-centered perspective on the other hand” (p. 3), and that

either there are universal standards against which the reasonableness of arguments can be evaluated or, conversely, that there are no determinate standards against which arguments can be evaluated, and hence no methods by which disputes can be rationally resolved (p. 1).

In each case, the first option is quite clear: this is the appeal to objective standards that Professor Schwed insists are unattainable. Let us call this *rationalism*. The harder question is whether the second option represents the abandonment of *all* standards of rationality, which I shall call *nihilism*, or just the abandonment of *universal* standards of rationality, which I shall call *relativism*. Hence my first question is whether Professor Schwed is proposing that we adopt relativism as a middle ground between rationalism and nihilism, or that we find some other middle ground between relativism and rationalism. If he is suggesting the latter, he is in good, if demanding, company: as Chris Swoyer observes

many writers now advise moving ‘beyond relativism’ (many books, chapters, and articles bear this phrase in the title), counseling us to steer a course between the Scylla of relativism, on the one side, and the Charybdis of an over-simplified absolutism, on the other. Finding such a course is easier said than done, however, and there is more agreement on the desirability of such a project than on how to carry it out. (Swoyer 2003, §5.10)

Professor Schwed’s own references to relativism do not settle this question. On the one hand, we are told that one of the alternatives to be avoided is a “relativist point of view” (p. 3), but on the other that the position he favours carries a “relativistic aura” (p. 8). Of course, relativism is a broad church. I shall assume that his goal is a form of relativism that does as much justice as possible to all our intuitions: both that of the objectivity of reason, and that of its culture-ladenness. For what it’s worth, that would be my goal too.

2. RATIONALITY AS LANGUAGE-GAME

Professor Schwed finds in the later Wittgenstein “a call for a change of perspective in the traditional understanding of the concept of rationality” (p. 5). His particular focus is on Wittgenstein’s concept of the “language-game,” in which Prof. Schwed finds “a more fluid, more diversified, and more activity-oriented perspective on language” (p. 5). Hence he argues that

the study of rationality should be fixed in the study of language-games, which shifts the traditional focus from the human being that pretends to be rational to her activities in the framework of a language-game (p. 6).

Thus

a person is not rational but her behaviour is rational due to her participating in a specific language-game, which involves the concepts in the reason/rational family. It is the language-game that manifests a rational behaviour and not the person herself. (p. 6)

COMMENTARY ON MENASHE SCHWED

Language-games embody practices, and many concepts that we mistakenly suppose to be universal are actually relative to these practices. Thus Wittgenstein's approach embeds the concept of rationality in practice. Rather than seek universal rules of rationality we must acknowledge that these rules are only to be found in particular language-games. This picture raises two questions. How are these rules implemented, and where does this relativism figure on the spectrum of positions from rationalism to nihilism? The first question leads us into the vexed issue of rule-following. Professor Schwed warns us that

there is no fact of the matter here regarding a rigid definition of what it means to act in accordance with a rule or in conflict with it and Wittgenstein insists on obfuscating the whole issue of rule following (p. 7).

With due trepidation, I shall attempt a clarification. Wittgenstein poses the problem as follows: "no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action could be made out to accord with the rule" (*PI*, §201). At base, this is the observation that the choice of rules will be underdetermined by any finite amount of data, an idea which can be traced back at least as far as Leibniz (Goldstein 1999, p. 76). Wittgenstein's solution to this problem is to invert the conceptual priority of rules and practice (or, better: to point out that we had it the wrong way round). We do not start out with a set of rules and then try to behave in accordance with them, we start out with a practice, and only after we have grasped it do we try to capture it in a system of rules. Wittgenstein says this in his next point—"And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice" (*PI*, §202)—but very concisely, and in the course of doing something else. He makes the underlying point more explicit elsewhere, for example in *On Certainty*:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game (*OC*, §204).

(If this account is correct, then Professor Schwed's observation that "What really gives the practices their stability is that people agree in their interpretations of the rules" (p. 11) can't be right, unless interpretation is understood in the artificial sense of "the substitution of one expression of the rule for another" (*PI*, §201). If people agree it will be because they share a practice, not a point of view about how to interpret rules.) Thus, on Professor Schwed's Wittgensteinian account, rationality is ultimately grounded in practice. But what are these practices? An answer to the second question, and an assessment of just how relativist all this has turned out, will depend on the nature of, and relationship between, these practices, or "forms of life." Wittgenstein grants his language-games a significant degree of autonomy:

We are not, however, regarding the language-games which we describe as incomplete parts of a language, but as languages complete in themselves, as complete systems of human communication (*BB*, p. 81).

Professor Schwed follows suit, concluding that

ANDREW ABERDEIN

Wittgenstein shows that the meaning of 'reasoning' or 'being rational' is divergent and depends on forms of life; it is divergent because of contrasts between groups of people and historical periods, between different social structures and so forth, and in short, because of *culture* (p. 9).

This suggests a full-blooded relativism and little hope of a rapprochement with rationalism. However, I shall conclude by suggesting that Professor Schwed's Wittgensteinian characterization of rationality can be brought more into tune with our intuitions of the universality and objectivity of reason. I shall begin by agreeing that reason can best be understood in terms of practice, and that it is a fragmented concept: many different practices correspond to different facets of rationality. However, there are several factors that count in favour of universality. Firstly, practices are subject to strong external selective pressures. Only those practices that aid human flourishing are likely to endure and become widespread. Secondly, some practices are very widespread indeed, perhaps encompassing all of humanity or at least the individuals normally thought rational. Thirdly, even where practices seem to diverge, they frequently share common features and components. In particular, ostensibly profoundly divergent practices can often be understood as intelligible in terms of a common framework. In the case of rationality, some central concepts in argumentation theory, such as the argumentation scheme, may be steps towards the articulation of this framework. Where the framework is shared, the disagreement is one of degree. (Of course, the framework must itself be understood in terms of practice, if scepticism about rule-following is to be avoided. Hence this point is a refinement of the last.) Finally, evaluative judgments that can only be made within specific practices, may nevertheless command respect amongst people at large. As Martha Nussbaum observes in somewhat different circumstances,

The fact that a good and virtuous decision is context-sensitive does not imply that it is right only *relative to*, or *inside*, a limited context, any more than the fact that a good navigational judgment is sensitive to particular weather conditions shows that it is correct only in a local or relational sense. It is right absolutely, objectively, from anywhere in the human world, to attend to the particular features of one's context; and the person who so attends and who chooses accordingly is making [...] the humanly correct decision, period. (Nussbaum 1988, p. 45)

This picture is still relativist in some sense. It is expressly limited to human reason, and likely excludes some of the more esoteric human language-games which might be considered rational by their participants. Much of it turns on empirical claims, and is to that extent provisional. But it does have the merit of explaining the diversity of forms which reason can take, while respecting our intuition that the rational should be (practically) universal.

[Link to paper](#)

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COMMENTARY ON MENASHE SCHWED

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