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A Prolegomena To Any Future Nihilistic Philosophy

John A. Marmysz

~1995

Years ago, I got into an argument with a woman over the merits of an ethics based upon rational principles versus the merits of an ethics based upon personal preference. She was a Kantian; I was a nihilist. There didn't seem to be any common ground for us to share. Being younger and much less aggressive in my technique of debate than she, I came away from the interaction feeling like I was the loser. My suggestions were dismissed by this woman with a condescending laugh. She would then reassert her own points like they were established facts, gesturing in the air as if to illustrate the "common sense" she spoke.

Well, years have passed and woe be it to that woman if our paths ever cross again. You see, my philosophic self confidence has strengthened over time and now, in retrospect, I recognize the flaws, errors and sophistries utilized by rationalists in general, but which were especially prominent in the arguments of the Kantian in question. Allow me then to draw the battle lines and replay the incident the way it would occur today, showing the full force of the nihilistic viewpoint and the weakness of the opposition. Far

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from committing the “straw man” error, I will simply show that the rationalists “Kant” provide satisfactory rebuttals to the nihilistic critique.

Kant placed a great deal of emphasis on morality’s rational properties. According to his view, anyone, by an exercise of reason, can deduce the principles and rules that govern correct moral action. Using a kind of naturalistic argument, he concluded that reason, like an organ, must exist for a purpose, and that purpose is to deduce moral imperatives. To live morally is to live in accordance with that imperative deducible by “pure” reason alone—namely the “Categorical Imperative”; the “Golden Rule” by a different name. For Kant, morality possessed a distinct form that could be “summarized” into an overarching principle and the basis for moral action lay in adherence to this principle.

Now, the alert nihilist will pull in the reigns. “Whoah, Kantian! Can we slow down and talk about ‘reason’ for a minute?” Kant and his overzealous advocates cavalierly assert that humans are essentially “rational beings”, as if “reason” is some sort of tangible thing that can be identified by pointing at it. But it is difficult to see the similarity between an organ and “reason”. Furthermore, there are some organs, like the appendix or tonsils, which serve no real purpose and which we can do quite fine without. My first mistake when arguing with “Ms. Kantian” was to indulge her and not challenge her exercise in the reification of “reason”.

But even if I did allow her this step, can’t many things—including incompatible conclusions—be reasoned? Take for example arguments for the existence of God. Suppose someone had the audacity to propose that since God is a perfect being, and since perfection implies existence, God must exist. This argument is perfectly “reasonable”. It moves quite logically from its premises to its conclusion. An equally “reasonable” competitor, however, might argue that if an all powerful and wholly “good” God existed, he wouldn’t allow “evil” in the world. There is evil in the world. Therefore an all powerful and wholly “good” God does not exist.

Case closed...at least until the next “reasonable” argument from the other side is voiced. If there is a God, he certainly works in mysterious (not reasonable) ways.

Everyone’s got reasons, and everyone reasons, but the existence of a faculty called “reason” does not follow from any of this. Rather than a thing or a faculty, it may be more accurate to talk about the process of “reasoning”. When we speak about reason, it seems that what we are really talking about is the process of offering reasons in support of a belief, point of view, or conclusion. Reasoning involves the process of argumentation, and arguments can be convincing in two major ways: (1) they can appeal to rationality or (2) they can appeal to intuition. The arguments of a logician illustrate the rational end of the scale. His exercises in the formulae of allowable inference are nearly devoid of content, representing rational, formal relationships between variables. At the opposite end of the scale—the intuitive end—are the “arguments” of the TV telethon host. His ability to convince is based almost totally on formless content. He cries and puts his arms around crippled children, counting on the persuasive power of emotion, accessed by intuition, to trigger an empathic response in others. Somewhere in between these extremes paces the trial lawyer who mixes appeals to rational legalism with emotional appeals to justice and fair play.

The skilled formulation of convincing, rational arguments is learned by devoting much time, effort and many resources to academic studies. It is through this scholarly process of legitimation that one earns the privilege to be taken seriously in the activity of convincing others rationally. Because of the time, effort and resources involved in “earning degrees”, a minority of the individuals in a population will pursue this course. The obstacles emplaced are sufficient to deter most people from completing (or even attempting) a program of academic study. The result is that the skill of rational argument, and the privilege that accompanies it, will be concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of individuals.

The power to convince through appeals to intuition, on the other hand, is not granted only to those who are trained formally. When a person appeals to intuition, he does so on the assumption that others share his intuition and that this shared knowledge is sufficient evidence for further statements. For the purposes of persuasion, humans often appeal to specific emotions, accessed by intuition, in order to activate empathic responses in others, thereby “moving” (convincing) them. It is because humans share a similar range of emotional responses that such a tactic seems to work. In any case, the ability to move others emotionally is present in all members of the species to some degree or another (...even mentally defective humans have the power to provoke empathy, though whether they are responsive to the same effects is an open question). The appeal to intuition/emotion, then, is a much more democratic tool than the appeal to rationality.

Whether an appeal leans more towards rationality or more towards intuition, it is being made on behalf of something, and the person making the appeal is attempting to convince others of that something. The arguer’s conclusion, in this case, is just that belief which the arguer believes to be true and which he wishes others to accept as well. If asked to justify this belief, the arguer may provide his reasons for belief or he may simply assert the belief as “intuitively” true.

The individual who argues for a moral belief attempts to justify an “ought” on the basis of what he feels “is” the case. For instance, I may say “I feel that it is wrong to torture children with cattle prods, so you ought not to torture children with cattle prods”, thereby making a prescriptive, moral statement by way of a descriptive one. Arguing for a moral belief entails working towards the imperative from the indicative; from what “is” to what “ought” to be. The move from “is” to “ought” makes the “is” necessary by universalizing it and creating a statement with imperative, or action directing, force. A moral statement, then, is dependent upon a statement of (perceived) fact. But this perceived fact (or premise

to act and explore the infinite alternatives and possibilities open to them, giving us a fuller and richer picture of what it is to be human.

The creation of, and submission to, moral judgements is closely associated with men's tendency to live socially. If social living depends upon the few coercing the many, then the elimination of universalized moral judgements might mean the collapse of society. But the fear that such an eventuality inspires is not necessarily well founded. The only alternative to an unequal relationship between the few and the many is not necessarily a "war of one against all". There are those who see an alternative in voluntary co-operation between individuals (the anarchy of Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin and more recently Bob Black), and those who value a kind of individualist, non-intervention between humans (Nietzsche and many recent "Post-modern" authors). The element of coercion may never be eliminated completely when it comes to the area of human interaction (simply by asserting a preference to someone, the seed of hierarchical ranking seems to be present), but by eliminating the tendency towards universalizing intuitions, humans would be less prone to restrict the available pool of perspectives on situations and would in fact be more likely to expand this pool, resulting in a more diverse, rich and full picture of the world.

A professor I studied under once said to me that the more deeply one explores what it means to be rational and logical, the less certain one becomes of how to draw the definitional lines between the rational and non-rational domains. My reasonable, Kantian opponent might perhaps still be unconvinced by my brief monologue, but I would hope that one thing is very clear. Without a clear definition of reason and rationality, the rationalists are fighting a losing battle against us mighty nihilists. The nihilistic perspective offers a coherent and, if you insist, "reasonable" account of the emergence and use of morality as a social control device. It offers a damaging critique of rationalism in general, but also promises to expand and deepen our understanding of the world and of humanity.

But of course, that's just my perspective.

or reason or what have you) is subject to acceptance or rejection as well, and if not accepted as intuitively true by a listener, the arguer may be called upon to support his belief in that "fact" with further reasons. This process of reason giving (or reasoning) will go on indefinitely until the arguer and listener arrive at commonly held beliefs that they both accept as intuitively true (or until they agree to disagree). Moral arguments are an especially clear case in which the acceptance or rejection of a conclusion is less dependent upon the reasons given for that conclusion than on the acceptance or rejection of certain "moral intuitions" about what is in fact true or false about the world.

Now, a Kantian would have us believe that the process of moral reasoning proceeds in a straight-forward, deductive, rational fashion. A person concerned with a moral question, according to the Kantian, is capable of deriving his conclusion from one of the formulations of the "Categorical Imperative". Any act that is immoral will undermine the Categorical Imperative and involve that person in a logical contradiction. For instance, when a Kantian asks, "Is it wrong to torture children with cattle prods?", his answer might proceed something like this: "The Categorical Imperative states that one should act only in a manner such that an action can be willed as a universal rule for all of mankind. So, what if everyone tortured children with cattle prods? Well, I was once a child. If I was tortured with a cattle prod I would feel a lot of physical and emotional pain. Since pain is something that I wish to avoid, I cannot possibly will the torturing of children as a universal rule, since it would entail willing something for myself that I do not will for myself. I would, in effect, be involved in a contradiction. Case closed." This all seems very "reasonable", but as has already been pointed out, so are many other things. A masochist might reason quite differently and become involved in no contradiction whatsoever.

But further than this, the Kantian has taken for granted what is really at issue. From where does this "Categorical Imperative" originate, and why should we accept it as a guiding principle? The

Categorical Imperative sounds strangely similar to one of those intuitions that you either share or don't share with someone. To say that it springs from "pure" reason is like telling non believers "You are just not thinking hard enough!", when in fact it is, perhaps, the Kantian who is not thinking hard enough about what motivates his desire to make universal moral statements in the first place.

The purpose of any moral judgement is to compel certain human behaviors and to constrain others, so all moralities are, in effect, coercive. The argument involved in justifying an intuition is meant to convince others that it is proper to act in accordance with that intuition, so limiting the number of allowable actions that may be pursued. The move from "is" to "ought", then, seems motivated by the desire to control other people's actions. In any moral debate, a few people try to get a lot of other people to constrain their actions.

There is a tremendous power imbalance in our society. A relatively small group of people possess the power to influence the vast majority of people by way of controlling the legitimate definitions of correct action. Those few who are allowed to participate in the battle of competing moral arguments are the ones who are entitled to define the permissible realm of actions in the population. Those trained and skilled in the use of rationality are the ones granted access to the moral battlefield, while those not so trained are locked out of the arena. Since the ability to use appeals to rationality can be concentrated in the hands of the few, training in rationality is an expedient method to assure that not everyone will be allowed to have their voices heard over the din of combat. It is one of the ways that an unequal power balance is maintained. To put it simply, rational arguments are considered legitimate because only a few people have the ability to skilfully formulate them, while intuitive appeals are delegitimated because many people can convincingly utilize them.

It should be stressed that there is nothing inherent in rationality that makes it more coercive than intuition when used in argument.

The point is simply that the privilege of rationality over intuition is a convenient method by which to assure that the many will act in accordance with the wishes of the few. Since both rational and intuitive appeals ultimately rest on premises arrived at intuitively, the privilege of rational arguments over intuitive ones does not make the moral debate any less based in intuition. This privilege does provide an arbitrary and controllable standard by which to grant authority to one opinion over another. The desire to coerce is exhibited in the desire to make moral statements. Rationality is simply an effective way to make a small range of those moral statements legitimate.

Nietzsche wrote, "The greatest danger that always hovered over humanity and still hovers over it is the eruption of madness—which means the eruption of arbitrariness in feeling, seeing and hearing, the enjoyment of the mind's lack of discipline, the joy of human unreason." Why is the lack of rationality seen as such a danger? Well, without the standard of rationality (or some such controllable standard) to judge moral arguments by, an effective means of social control disappears. If "anything is permitted", then no one has the legitimacy to control anyone else. There is no "right" or "wrong", only differing perspectives and preferences. This is a danger to those who assert that there exist certain fixed, absolute, independent and "naturally occurring" truths because it redistributes the definitional power previously concentrated in their hands amongst the entire population. The perspectival character of existence is such that no two interpretations of a situation are equal, and all interpretations ultimately rest upon feeling, emotion, intuition and non-rational, idiosyncratic responses. The implication of this state of affairs is that no one perspective has ultimate authority over any other. What follows for the moral debate is that the battlefield of conflicting views is prone to be invaded by those who had previously been judged "unfit for service". Such a change would allow for the dismantling of social hierarchies, promoting a situation in which all members of the species would share common freedom