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Commentary on Phyllis Rooney: “Reasoning and Social Context: The Role of Social Status and Power”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dr Rooney’s paper, if I may say so, is quite abstract, and that made it challenging for me to understand, because I have trouble with abstraction and am more at home with concrete, situated examples. But if I do understand Dr. Rooney’s paper, this fact itself is an illustration of one of her theses, namely, that gender is more complicated than the simple male=abstraction, female=concreteness equations would have it. In these comments I state my understanding of Dr. Rooney’s thesis, discuss a couple of its implications, mention possible connections to recent argumentation theory and end with a remark about methodology. I hope it becomes clear that I find the paper both informative and suggestive.

2. THE ARGUMENT

I take Dr. Rooney’s thesis to be that feminist work that treats the social not as a-political but as including relations of power and status contributes to revising our theoretical understanding of abstraction (as distinct from the particulars of context) and of the social (as distinct from the individual)—concepts important for our theorizing about cognition, reasoning and logic.

The feminist work in question regards the identification of the abstract and the individual with maleness and of sensitivity to context and the social with femaleness—that is found, for example, in some interpretations of Gilligan’s findings or in Nye’s critique of logic—as itself buying into a sexist construction of gender.

She argues that we need to replace the contrast between the person regarded as an individual who engages in reasoning as a private act of decontextualized abstraction, and the social individual whose nature is a function of networks of relationships and who thinks always in terms of the particulars of each context. In its place we should regard the individual as formed by social roles and relationships that tend to be shaped in part by power and status, so there is never a private, disengaged individual, but always a person whose very nature is socially constructed—that is, shaped by a history of gender, race, culture, religion, status and other social factors. And we regard reasoning, cognition and logic as always entailing some kind of abstraction, so the focus is not on the contrast between the abstract and the contextualized, but on the degree and nature of the

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abstraction and, presumably, the role of the contextual in any particular analysis. Moreover, the two interact. That is to say, the way in which an individual's identity is socially and politically shaped will affect the nature of the abstraction and its relation to context exhibited in that person's cognition, reasoning and logic.

3. IMPLICATIONS

Dr. Rooney suggests that the insights that she reviews, coming out of recent feminist epistemology, offer directions for further research. She also mentions some implications that have quite practical consequences.

For one thing, it follows from her analysis that tests of reasoning ability need to be sensitive to how social and cultural factors may affect performance that is due to different kinds of reasoning. Given the evidence that people in different cultures interpret reasoning and logical tasks differently and so perform differently on them, the test constructor needs to find ways to tailor either the questions or the grading scheme to allow for these differences. We are still some way from having the detailed findings needed intelligently to design our testing and grading along these lines. Perhaps the best we can do for now is watch out for possible gender and other social influences on our students' performance. For example, I found that some students, for whatever reason—not, as far as I can tell anecdotally, related to gender—have huge difficulty drawing intelligible diagrams of argument structure, even though they can flawlessly describe in words the logical and dialectical relations at work. So I made tree diagrams optional, and accepted also prose descriptions of argument structure.

Similarly, Dr. Rooney suggests, those offering instruction in reasoning need to be sensitive to the possibility that they are imposing particular socially and culturally bound ways of understanding or interpreting problems and arguments. She points out that we need to keep in mind that contexts and situations are social and can be experienced and understood differently by people with different identities, since these place them in different social locations, even in the same situation (p. 7). Dr. Rooney's example is what is a thought of as a harmless joke by one person being offensive sexism or racism to another. In a class on law and punishment, to initiate discussion about kinds of punishment in class I tossed out the suggestion of sending convicted felons to remote, isolated, unpopulated areas, for example, Baffin Island. It turned out there was a student in the class who came from Baffin Island and she was, understandably, extremely offended by the example. The lesson is evident.

4. CONNECTIONS TO RECENT ARGUMENTATION THEORY

It strikes me that the enrichment of reasoning and argument analysis and evaluation by the perspectives of dialectic and rhetoric that has occurred in the last twenty years, if appropriately managed, might offer some of the nuance that Dr. Rooney is suggesting we need. Considering arguments rhetorically when interpreting them means trying to understand the audience that the arguer had constructed in framing the argument, and that requires understanding the social and political situation of the arguer and of his or her anticipated audience. And thinking rhetorically as an arguer means trying to identify the thinking and attitudes of the audience, which includes being sensitive to their roles of

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power and status and the attendant relations between the audience, arguer and context that will shape the audience's understanding and reception of the argument. All of this requires self-awareness and an appreciation on the part of the arguer of how he or she is likely to be perceived, including an appreciation of the role of his or her power and status in that perception.

Thinking dialectically as an arguer entails anticipating the possible misunderstandings, hesitations, doubts, and outright disagreements with which the audience is likely to greet the core argument, and seeking ways to respond that will make the argument clear and respond appropriately to those objections in the dialectical elaboration of the argument. Thinking dialectically as the recipient and judge of an argument entails trying to understand its dialectical functions, which means reconstructing the challenges the arguer anticipates, and that in turn requires appreciating the situation of the arguer.

I have been struck, in my teaching latterly, by how it is difficult at least in practice to disentangle the rhetorical and dialectical perspectives from the logical, particularly if logic is understood to be about what follows from what not just in the narrow sense of what is deductively entailed by what, but also in the broader sense of what is supported by what—what it is reasonable to conclude from the available or offered grounds. For instance, what it is reasonable for me to conclude from the grounds you offer will depend on how I ought to understand what you are offering as grounds, which requires judgements about you, your roles and your relationship to me. And it also depends on how well I take you to deal with my reasonable hesitations or doubts about those grounds or their probative force, given my perspective. Here rhetoric, dialectic and logic merge.

I am suggesting that the best available understandings of ourselves and of those with whom we interact in reasoning and arguing are essential from the perspective that sees argument as the intersection of rhetoric, dialectic and logic. I take it that Dr. Rooney's point is that the insights of recent feminist epistemology, especially as they apply to how we conceive of the social/individual nexus and the abstract/concrete nexus contribute to that understanding.

4. METHODOLOGY

Another of Dr. Rooney's examples comes from some revised readings of Descartes. As noted, she argues that the social infuses the individual (p. 9), and so we can expect to locate epistemic individualism within broader cultural understandings of individualism (*ibid.*). In that light, she refers us to work on Descartes that connects his individualism with his skepticism and situates these in a psycho-cultural context. She reports Bordo's argument for the influence of profound changes in the world of knowledge at the beginning of the scientific revolution, and influence the themes of uncertainty, instability, anxiety, and needs for foundation and certainty that motivate Descartes's work (*ibid.*) This also helps explain why the audience for Descartes's work was so receptive (p. 10). I would add that this sort of insight is not exclusive to feminist authors. Toulmin, for example, similarly makes a case that Descartes' drive for secure, certain foundations for knowledge can be explained with reference to the terrible strife of the Thirty Years' War and the religious upheaval that motivated it. "The 17th-century philosophers' 'Quest for Certainty'" he writes, "was ... a timely response to a specific historical challenge—the

political, social, and theological chaos embodied in the Thirty Years' War" (Toulmin 1990, p. 70).

This discussion of Descartes' motivation raises a methodological issue. When we seek explanations, for instance in terms of gender and power/status, etc., it is because we think there are mistakes that need to be explained. If we believe a doctrine, belief, method, attitude, etc., is correct, then it does not need to be explained why anyone would espouse it. This applies to the explanations themselves as well. If we think an explanation is plausible, we don't seek further explanation of how it came to be proposed or endorsed. It follows that explaining a doctrine presupposes a prior successful critique of it.

The production of explanations is an important element of critique. For if a view worthy of critique is mistaken, the question arises why an intelligent person would endorse it. And since one of the factors making a view worthy of critique is that it is widely shared, it needs to be explained why, in spite of its falsehood, a doctrine is widely embraced. Thus a critique that does not also explain why an allegedly mistaken view is maintained, especially if it is widely supported, is incomplete.

That said, explanations of the motivation behind a belief, theory, methodology, etc., look like a type of *ad hominem* related to the *abusive ad hominem*. They seem to be an attack on a thesis by means of an attack on the motivations of its proponent, which are irrelevant to its truth. However, if the theory has been refuted, then explaining why it was held by exposing the questionable attitudes and beliefs that motivated it is not fallacious, for to do so is an explanation, not a refutation. On the other hand, if the theory has not been refuted, then attacking as questionable the attitudes and beliefs that allegedly motivate it as a means of discrediting it *is* fallacious, for it is question-begging—it assumes, what in the context needs to be shown, that the belief, theory, methodology, or whatever has to be explained because it is false.

To be sure, the relation between refutation and explanation is not in practice so neat. We can come to suspect a doctrine's truth if we have good reason to believe that its endorsement can be explained by the fact that doing so supports perspectives such as interests that are open to challenge. We cross the line into fallacious *ad hominem* only if we take that fact alone as sufficient to refute the doctrine.

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REFERENCES

Toulmin, Stephen. (1990). *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. New York: The Free Press.