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Commentary on: P. Rooney's "Feminism and Argumentation: A Response to Govier"

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Is critique adversarial argument? This question is difficult to answer given different perspectives on what constitutes genuinely instructive versus argumentative discourse, appreciative reading versus strategic dismantling. Undoubtedly, in any particular case such distinctions would depend upon the point of views of the reader and read, the corrector and the corrected, who might not always agree and reasonably differ as to whose communication was in or out of line. Given this ambiguity, one is tempted at the outset to modify the question into a weaker form: For whom, if anyone, could critique be considered adversarial and argumentative? The answer to the weaker question might be less ambiguous: well, if one has stakes as a power holder and is a witting or unwitting advocate of "the dominant paradigm," then critique is perceived to be a challenge, an affront, a claim to rectify historic injustices—and therefore, a power holder would dub critique adversarial and argumentative. On the other hand, those essaying a critique might claim that the felt defensiveness is simply pressure—a realization that arises when the hypocrisy of exclusionary, hierarchical, vested interest. The perception of argumentativeness is what happens when the partiality an alleged universal belief or method is exposed to proper identification. Notice the incipient standoff here. If adversarial practices are part of the dominant paradigm, indeed if argumentation itself is a strategy of force, rationalization, hierarchy and so forth, and if critique could legitimately be construed as creating pressure, confrontation, and argumentative force—by any person or group, then one might inquire as to the differentia between "the dominant paradigm" and the novel, liberatory space of cooperative reasoning. As this line of reasoning goes, one might foresee an infinite regress of *tu quoque*'s concerning who is more or less straightforwardly adversarial or cooperative than thou.

The reason that the above answer to the question leads to such a regress is that the modified question misunderstands critique, holding critique, which is I think a purely negative arc of widening criticism, to the standards of a productionist view of argumentation. In a productionist world, arguments must yield true claims through proof, or rationalize beliefs by critical testing, or convince audiences through persuasion. Whether the products of critical thinking, informal logic, or rhetoric be true belief, justified conviction or deliberated action, arguments are such because reasons and claims are productively connected. Adversarial argument is a special case of this process: a kind of critical testing set within--or invited by--a certain style, for a, relationship or procedure that channels or frames oppositional thinking, writing and speaking. Critique does not fall comfortably within productionist assumptions (although it plays with some of our common expectations about reasoning). I would like to examine feminist critique per se, explicating Professor Rooney's work to show why (1991, 2002, 2003).

Feminist critiques raise to awareness the pervasiveness, significance and harmfulness of the ways differences have been handled throughout time and across cultures, societies, institutions, and individuals. Specifically, critique exposes those practices which appear to float

above the regimes of power--weightless, innocent, powerful, secure and iconic. The point is to expose as regimes of power, practices passing along hierarchies as natural categories and so constructing and implicated in structures of domination. In this vein, Professor Rooney and others conduct critique on the tradition and practice of philosophy. In her reply to Govier, as well as in other published articles she was kind enough to send me, there are four moments of critique that I would like to precise—although the details of the argument deserve reading on their own.

(1) Sexism: Philosophers denigrate women by placing the commendable virtues of reason on one side of the scale and the irrational, natural, and weak-minded vices on the other. Pythagoras did it. So did Bacon.

(2) Condescension: Philosophers are not always openly sexist. Some invest women with admirable, even powerful virtues—such as the worship of Athena. The construction of powerful women is a deceptive product of the male gaze, which reconstructs a fiction and idealization that further denigrates real women.

(3) Repression: Philosophers don't always make overt gender divisions. In fact many do so unconsciously with deep, revealing metaphors that expose really how they are thinking. Plato's cave of shadows and ignorance is really the womb, for instance.

(4) Suppression: Philosophers who neither develop overtly gendered categories nor have vivid metaphors nevertheless pass along patriarchy, too, because their philosophy is really a commentary on the society of which they are part. Thus, Descartes skepticism is read as an attack on the organic mother church of Medieval times. Note this move does not need to be consistent, because the Church itself, too, can be read as patriarchal on an alternate critique venue.

Feminist critique finds patriarchy saturated into the practices of culture. The exposure of the breadth and scope of such saturation makes critique a sinuous enterprise, it seems to me, not because patriarchy cannot be found but that the effort has to be conducted with a single-minded determination. Overt sexism, disguised affiliation, linguistic betrayal, or simply failing to address the issue would appear to cover all the bases; indeed, a feminist criticism that did not find patriarchy in every corner, no matter how apparently tangential, innocent, detached, or seemingly sympathetic, would not be a properly radical feminist critique—unless I am mistaken.

There appears to be circularity to this position, from a productionist standpoint. A productionist would likely brand critique a self-sealing argument, a point of view incapable of disconfirmation. But critique is not productionist argumentation. Critique is agnostic in relation to belief, conviction, or action (that is why there are multiple feminist post-critique programs, no particular proof-warrant-claim flows from negation through exposure); rather, critique is a burden shifting strategy, as it were, challenging the other side to demonstrate that patriarchy can't be found or so seen. Critique is a strategy that opens critical space by sustained unraveling of the contexts, rules and understandings upon which argumentation is produced. In this regard critique is not adversarial because it has no position to defend; and is not argumentative—in the usual sense--because it merely provokes self-examination of assumptions. Critique is contestation in the interest of cooperation. If representatives of the dominant power paradigm

feel affronted, it is their own dodgy position they are discovering, not the arguments of an adversary—or so the argument goes. Yet, it is possible that the adversarial quality of critique may be seen to emerge in a different way, not with confrontation of the power structure, but with achieving solidarity among those marked by “difference.”

The deep adversarial quality of critique, if adversarial is the right word, comes from its implications for breaking apart solidarity with other pools of difference, or with experiences of difference within the self. This is a thesis I wish to develop and test in several parts.

First, it would seem to me that any question of difference could deploy any or all of the four strategies above. Philosopher X distinguished between class, race, age, orientation, ethnicity, and so forth. These denigrated difference. Philosopher X attributed virtues to X but these were falsely conceived and an unwitting reflection of prejudice. Philosopher X uses metaphors that reveal his racism, homophobia, ageism, ethnic prejudices and racial stereotypes, even though he scrupulously avoids such overt arguments in his text. Philosopher X does not respond to issues of difference, therefore his work must be read in the context of difference. Now, I am not arguing against the appropriation of critique. Different hierarchies ought to be leveled. Nor am I arguing that the critique of difference from alternate angles would not yield useful alternative histories of prejudice, discrimination, and domination. Finally, I am not arguing that feminist critique does not provide a rich position from which certain experiences in arguing cannot profitably be viewed. The adversarial tone of critique comes from a different vantage.

If critique is pursued far enough and equally across all power formations, then the object of critique—the systems of power—begin to disintegrate because rather than a hegemony what becomes transparent is that people have multiple positions of advantage and disadvantage. Males, to take an example, who are poor, disabled, of color, and so forth may have health care issues that are not being met, even in spite of their patriarchal positioning as dominant. Critique operates so long as one opposes difference against sameness; critique undermines its own capacity to the extent it is appropriated. This would make critique successful, save for the second question.

Second, if critique is appropriated then the question arises what redress is possible, most urgent, compelling—and for whom. This is the point Govier alludes to in commenting on the arguments she has experienced when engaged in mediation, dispute alternative and so forth. Yet critique does not lead us to proportionate judgments about what sins against recognition of difference are better or worse, and for whom. Since the idea of critique is to uncover that which is not obvious, or to point out that the obvious is not the same as the tolerable, and since misestimations are infused into all human reason by corrupting patriarchy, it is difficult to see how a scale of measurement could be assembled. Let me make this point clearer. Of course, certain manifestations of patriarchy seem obviously egregious: denial of funding for medical research in women's health care, unequal wages, sex slavery, for example. However, it may be the case that our very thinking that an issue is unimportant may itself be an indicator of the depth of normalization of patriarchal inequality and therefore an insidiously stubborn bulwark of the system.

The problem with the absence of a scale of measurement or common denominator among difference, of course, is that issues of difference are not singular but often multiple. A person or collective is discriminated against not just because they are X, but also because they are fitted by society into categories Y, Z, and Q. There are multiple essentialisms which are deployed to ensnare a single individual or those located within an institutional system or geographic space. In

the human misery index, where does one begin with which complaint in establishing order of importance and in which situations? Absent a view of reason that affirms the collaborative production of norms—a complement to critique—all reconstructive moves are self-undercut as cooptation, tokenism, repression and so forth. This is a hypothetical rather than an actual problem it seems, for critique often is accompanied by a companion argument, an affirmative claim to an agenda, if nothing else a place to work inside the system from a vantage outside it, but such agenda setting involves risk taking because it returns the critic to the productionist world.

Third, affirmative strategies augment critique, reshaping such readings into something other than a hermeneutics of suspicion, with its latent adversariality against reconstruction. I would suggest that critique could expand through an affirmative moment, one of affiliation, that transforms negatively attributed traits into positive or affirmative qualities—and points out that such qualities in the particular are always mixed, rather than exclusive. For instance, whereas once argument was seen as hierarchically arranged as regulated by formal reason, practical reasoning now is believed to have significant, independent status and can be understood as sensitivity to context. Is this a triumph of feminist principles? One might claim such as a breakthrough categorized as “emotional intelligence”—not as an oxymoron but a genuine way of knowing, rendered legitimate by extended thoughtful reflection. Yet, this affirmation would have to face critique 2 in Rooney's list. The disadvantage of crafting an affirmative counterpart to critique is that it breaks the circularity of the indictment, because the price for acknowledging progress is finding that sometimes patriarchy—or its principles of enactment—do retreat. To acknowledge this would limit the potential power of criticism. The acceptance of affiliation, immune even for a moment from critique, may prevent such a strategy from becoming self-adversarial argument.

Should the language, values, recognitions that are constitutive of the self become only site for discoveries of greater and greater infestations of power, domination, and degradation, one's own sense of self would be submitted to the tyrannizing gaze of a relentless adversary with unlimited powers of negation. Since any individual is a composite of many differences, critique could be turned against each and the self become dismantled into an unending dispersion of false norms, differences and exclusions. Useful critique may clarify the extent of opposition necessary to create or open a space for self-transformation, but without an affirmative turn—such as Rooney recognize in experiential women's narratives—the conduct of critique itself becomes relentless, adversarial, and oppressive. Feminist critique appears to realize this danger. Indeed, the contingencies, risks, and possibilities of affirmative turns within feminist critique make of such daring risks and recoveries a rich and complex field of thinking.

So the answer to the initial question is that critique is potentially adversarial argument, but it is adversarial because, taken far enough, it turns a self against itself, constantly and to the last degree; however, critique is not necessarily adversarial if its practitioners take the risk of recouping an affirmative moment, but such risks lead back to a productionist field of argument where other questions of reasoning await. In the end, what matters for production is that one is able to constitute an affirmative moment sufficient to resist splicing the self into negative fragments through infinite self-doubt and skepticism.

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