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EXISTENTIALISM, EMOTIONS, AND THE CULTURAL LIMITS OF RATIONALITY

Robert C. Solomon

The current “rage against reason,” to use Richard Bernstein’s nice, alliterative phrase, has at least some of its origins in that oddly shaped philosophical movement dubbed “existentialism” by its ultimate (and perhaps only) full-time practitioner, Jean-Paul Sartre. It was no accident, although it may have contributed to a monumental misunderstanding, that one of the first American authors on existentialism, William Barrett, titled his best-known and most widely read book “*Irrational Man*,” and some of the more dramatic pronouncements and situations depicted by existentialist authors would seem to support that one-phrased and now somewhat sexist synopsis. Moving backward through the “movement,” we think of Sartre’s various indecisive and troubled characters, and of Camus’ odd “antiheroes,” who commit murder without reason or “drop out” of an enviable life in Paris to haunt the seediest bars in Amsterdam—not to mention Camus’ celebrations of the maddest of Roman emperors and one of the most pathetic characters in Greek mythology as “heroes of the absurd.” We think of Heidegger’s obscurantist style as well as the murky objections against Western reason and rationality in *Sein und Zeit* and in his later writings, and then with some relief skip back to Nietzsche—not quite an existentialist—and his rather famous ravings against reason and Socrates and the “otherworldly” and “unnatural” ways of thinking. Then there is Kierkegaard, who quite openly celebrated the “irrational” and the “absurd,” a century before Camus, who defended the now rather popular notion of a criterionless, purely personal and “subjective” choice of one’s mode of existence, or—in more contemporary California lingo, one’s “life-style.” Superficially, at least, there is an existentialist antagonism toward rationality or, at least, a fascination with those characters and contexts in which rationality as usually conceived is either inadequate or breaks down.

One could, of course, continue to push the “movement” back another several generations—to Pascal’s salute to the heart (which Nietzsche called his “suicide of reason”) or to Augustine’s confessions, which, despite their Platonic structure, ultimately bypassed reason in favor of faith, with or without the “leap” that later existentialists would deem necessary. Indeed, existentialism has even been traced back to Socrates, for who else manifested the existential attitude better than he (whatever he may have been going on about when he talked about the “*Eidoi*”)? But existentialism is hard enough to define as a movement already—even Nietzsche, as I mentioned, is an ambivalent inclusion—and, characterized broadly enough, existentialism might include half of the modern world. For example, if individual freedom is taken as its central

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tenet, existentialism would arguably include Hegel and Marx, not to mention Locke, Burke, Bertrand Russell, and Robert Nozick. If the absence of any coherent or singularly consistent decision procedure is taken to be definitive, we might welcome as neo-Existentialists Hilary Putnam, Richard Sylvan, and John Kekes, not to mention Jon Elster and, in his Australian mode, David Lewis. On the other hand, if we were to take as our working definition a defense of irrationalism, the list might well shrink to the null set. Both Sartre and Camus turn out to be traumatized, old-fashioned rationalists rather than the fruitcakes they were sometimes made out to be at Oxford sherry parties. Heidegger defended what he called "thinking" even if he didn't defend overly technological "reason," and even Nietzsche often claimed to be a "scientist" in most matters philosophical. Kierkegaard may have criticized reason and written in a curious personal and sometimes cryptic style, but his works are carefully planned and executed with a calculated prose and a crystal-clear goal in mind. He is, in this sense at least, considerably more "rational" than many a young analytic philosopher, who may celebrate reason but constructs his or her career out of barbed-wire, sometimes indecipherable prose, and a dozen disjointed commentaries with no end in sight but tenure. Then again, one might also note that when it comes to irrationalism of any description, existentialism has surely been more than surpassed by several new French voices. One might well look there to find the limits of reason—from the outside, so to speak—but too many philosophers who have done so have lost their way in the woods and never again found the clearing.

What I would like to do here, accordingly, is not to perform the usual existentialist raga against reason but rather use existentialism as a take-off point to explore an 'existentialist' thesis that is somewhat more my own. Freely using the ideas of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus in particular, mixed with some hesitation and an ad hominem distaste for Heidegger and a very different and not altogether compatible fascination with Hegel, I would like to explore the limits and limitations of reason, not on the basis of any absurdist thesis about the irrationality of the world or the futility of the human condition but rather by virtue of an exploration of a central interest, if not an essential ingredient, in all of the above-named authors: the emotions and our deep emotional engagements in the world. Sartre, of course, wrote a short book about them. Camus' characters are most memorable precisely because of the emotions they did or (in the notable case of Meursault, "the stranger") did not have. Heidegger rightly rendered "moods" (*Stimmungen*) at the very core of Dasein's "Being-in-the-World," and both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche reflected upon as well as expressed a great many basic emotions, among them love and resentment, throughout their many books. Hegel is too often misunderstood as a superrationalist (in part because of his own

willful choice of a Kantian vocabulary), but he also believed that “nothing great is ever done in the world without passion” (a comment earlier made, somewhat surprisingly, by Kant). It is emotion as well as the quest for rational comprehension that drives Hegel’s dialectic, and The Absolute, one could argue (I won’t here), is neither some divine intellectual pinnacle (“thought thinking itself”) nor a blank page in a parodic issue of *Mind* but the limit of reason fueled and ruled by the emotions, which is to say, by our very human engagements and concerns. But enough of fast-forward, MTV-style history. I want to spend my time talking about reason and emotions, from what I take to be my existentialist perspective. Let me not try to define what this means for my purpose here, except to say that it regards emotional engagement in the world as fundamental to reason.

I want to begin, therefore, not with emotion but with the concept—or rather a good many concepts—of reason and rationality. It is all well and good to talk about “the limits of reason,” but if one isn’t clear about what or where the field is, he or she won’t be much good at delineating its boundaries. This has caused considerable confusion in the existentialist camp, particularly among its commentators. Heidegger rails against reason, but it turns out that he is primarily contemptuous of one sort of reason in particular, what Max Weber called “instrumental reason.” Kierkegaard argues that ethics cannot be rationally defended, by which he means that there is no ultimate standard according to which one must choose to be ethical, but it turns out that rationality (in fact a very Kantian conception of Practical Reason) is part and parcel of the ethical life, once one has chosen it. Nietzsche accuses Socrates of using reason to escape the supposed doldrums of his life, but then he himself employs any number of the same argumentative techniques and strategies; the reason which he rejects is rather a version of Platonic philosophy, not the use of argumentation and evidence. And so on. Camus thinks that life is absurd because it is “indifferent” to human reason, but he doesn’t dispute the claim that we are, in some sense, rational creatures. Sartre is skeptical about reason but follows Husserl’s avowedly rational phenomenological method and proves himself, in Iris Murdoch’s appropriate phrase, a “romantic rationalist.” What is happening here is that a number of very different conceptions of reason are getting played off against one another, and the result, not surprisingly, is confusion or worse—an exciting, because utterly misleading, philosophical thesis. What sounds like a rejection of rationality is, on closer inspection, only a shift from one meaning to another. Nevertheless, most traditional philosophical theories in the “West” (although not only there) define and defend as central to philosophy and as a universal feature of human nature an overly exclusive, exceedingly specialized and ethnocentric concept of rationality. Against this, the existentialists try to deny the centrality of that rationality

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even if they then go on to defend equally ethnocentric and even more exclusive notions of human nature. (Sartre's defense of "freedom" is an example of the first, Kierkegaard's special notion of "existence" is an example of the second.) So before I get to my main thesis about existential engagement and emotion, let me offer, at the risk of being first contentious and then very tedious, some "multicultural" observations about the philosophers' employment of reason and "reason" and then distinguish several different meanings of "reason" and "rationality," with an eye to slimming down the list to some more or less unambiguous and manageable field, which we can then explore for its scope and limits.

Rationality, Ethnocentricity, and the Philosophical Pretense

Most philosophical discussions of "rationality" make me rather irritable (which is not to say "irrational"). All too often, we find that learned philosophers exercise great ingenuity to establish what they in fact all began by agreeing to: the belief that rationality is that virtue best exemplified by philosophers. True, rationality as ultimately conceived might dispense with the philosopher altogether and become pure thought thinking itself, but, short of this divine purity, the philosopher, merely finite as he or she may be, becomes the measure of rationality. All other putatively rational creatures, from the squid to the dolphin and the ape, from "primitive" and "developing" societies to the ancient cultures of the "East," are more or less rational insofar as they are or are not capable of doing what philosophers in the Western tradition do so well: they articulate abstract concepts, distinguish *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*, gather evidence and muster argument, reflect on the meaningfulness of what they say, dispute with those who raise objections against them, and demonstrate beyond a doubt that this or that thesis is indeed an a priori truth—despite the pigheaded refusal of certain less than fully rational colleagues to acknowledge this as well. Western philosophers from Aristotle to Gadamer and the deconstructionists have thus delighted in distinguishing their own rational discourse from the unreflective language of the "vulgar" and contrasting their own philosophically sophisticated societies from those whose inferior place on the evolutionary ladder is exemplified by the fact that they have not yet produced an Aristotle or a Hegel, much less a Derrida. The concept of rationality that emerges from these discussions, accordingly, tends to be ethnocentric and chauvinist as well as overly complex and obscure, laden with metaphysical baggage (for example, "logocentrism") and extremely intellectualized, with an excessive emphasis on what is supposedly uniquely human, in the use not just of language but of languages capable of self-reflection and, accordingly, self-undermining. The irony here, of course, is that the most advanced demonstrations of rationality tend to be precisely those that raise the paradoxical (but not to be taken all that seriously) conclusion that we are not rational after all.

Rationality, I want to argue, has been abused by philosophers. It has been obscured; ambiguities and equivocations have been plastered over; ever more technical meanings have been invented and then undermined (for example, Bayesian and other concepts of maximization in decision theory); and ever more stringent criteria have been applied to guarantee that, in the last analysis, no one could possibly qualify as a rational agent unless he or she had pursued at the minimum a baccalaureate, if not a Ph.D., in philosophy. Nor is this strictly a Western inflation of the currency of reason. In a detailed analysis of the Sanskrit concept of *Pramāna*, J. N. Mohanty, one of the world's best Sanskrit scholars as well as an accomplished Husserlian phenomenologist, has argued, for example, that rationality not only must be conceived in terms of a philosophical view but also requires a "theory of evidence, rational justification, and critical appraisal . . . and also a theory of these theoretical practices."¹ So, too, philosophers since Socrates (who may or may not have had such a "theory" himself) have made philosophical reflection the hallmark of rationality. Needless to say, this eliminates from candidacy a great many cultures for whom self-reflection and self-criticism have not been encouraged or developed, for whom the theory of knowledge is not an interesting or an intelligible set of questions, for whom "justification" is a matter of authority and not intellectual autonomy. Nor would such a notion of rationality apply to virtually any species of "higher" animal, no matter how intelligent. ("What will philosophers do when they teach an ape to speak?" Oxbridge philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe was once asked. "They'll up the ante," she replied.)

By way of correction, I want to shift the conversation about rationality away from theory, reflective self-understanding, and justification and back to some more elemental aspects of human (and nonhuman) life. Once rationality is removed from its philosophical pretensions and relegated to a more commonsensical search for "living well," it is not at all clear that a great many animals and supposedly "simple" people will not emerge as far more rational than a great many philosophers. Most animals (it is falsely claimed "all") abstain from killing their own kind; few animals exemplify the extensive greed and imprudent self-destruction so evident in the recent ecological accomplishments of humanity. And many societies that have lived for centuries without "high" technology now serve with some reason as romanticized models of harmonious living—models of rationality that may lack *Realpolitik* but nevertheless remind us where the criteria for rationality ought to be sought: not in intelligence and ingenuity alone but in living well, in what Indian philosopher D. P. Chattopadhyaya calls "transparent" as opposed to more sophisticated metalevel "transcendental" rationality.² (The latest wave of romanticism—what one critic has called "the new Custerism"—is Kevin Costner's depiction of the amiably transparent life of the Sioux, in the film *Dances with Wolves*.) Once we have given up the self-reflective overlay

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superimposed on the good life by such philosophers as Aristotle and Socrates, who insisted absurdly that “the unexamined life is not worth living”—and the equally chauvinistic and angst-ridden emphasis on “purifying” reflection and “absolute freedom” imposed on us by Jean-Paul Sartre—it becomes quite evident that a happy rational life may be readily available to those who do not display any predilection or talent for philosophy or reflection whatever. Indeed, on the other side of the coin, we should remember that Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, and Unamuno, as well as a number of iconoclastic ancient philosophers both Greek and Oriental, insisted that rationality is above all anxiety and suffering; “consciousness is a disease.” Nietzsche remarked (in his *Gay Science*) that reflective consciousness becomes philosophically interesting only when we realize how dispensable it is. Much of Nietzsche’s philosophy, I would argue, is a reminder of and a plea for the more “instinctual” and the less reflective creative aspects of life.³

To say that rationality is at best optional and at worst pathological, however, is to go much further than I would like to go here. Indeed, rationality as reflection and self-consciousness seems to me to be, in a more modest Socratic sense, indispensable to what we, and not just philosophers, call “rationality.” But I do want to call into question the various overly sophisticated and “transcendental” conceptions of rationality that have been the source of much philosophical concern and suggest instead that we ought to be concerned primarily with a much more modest conception of “transparent” rationality, or with what, in the simplest philosophical parlance, means “living well.” Transparent rationality is not necessarily fully articulate or disputational. It is rather, I want to suggest, best captured in the thesis that rationality is *caring about the right things*. My thesis, accordingly, is that it is not reason but rather our emotions and affections that mark the limits of rationality, not from the ‘outside’ (like barbarians at the gate, determining boundaries by way of an external threat) but from the ‘inside’, as determinate of rationality itself. But such a shift implies that reason is not, as is so often assumed (or even defined as such) universal and necessary. (Of course emotions, like reason, have often been claimed to be universal—but by way of shared biology rather than logic or some special “faculty.”) But, in any case, our repertoire of emotions is based on the contingencies of the human condition and the circumstances of particular cultures and situations. What makes this view “existential” is the belief that human nature is—whatever else it may be—determined in large part by its circumstantial, cultural, and personal contingencies. Emotions, I would argue, are for the most part culturally determined. Rationality, too, is shaped and distinguished by culture. Accordingly, when philosophers sing the praises of rationality, it is not always clear what they are praising, apart from, as Bertrand Russell wryly put it, our “ability to do sums.” The very notion of “rationality,” I want to

suggest, is typically ethnocentric—where it is an explicit part of an ethos at all—and does not involve any singular or universal set of skills or abilities. This is not to say that reason—and our emotions—cannot have some kind of “objectivity,” so long as this doesn’t mean “universal and necessary.” This, I want to argue, is what existentialism (as I want to defend it) comes down to: the rejection of the authority of “transcendental” reason and a renewed emphasis on the immediacy of our emotional engagements in the “objective” framework of a culture. One might want to say “intersubjective” here, but that implies “solidarity” *versus* “objectivity,” which in turn presupposes a harsh philosophical skepticism, which in turn presupposes precisely that level of detached philosophical abstraction that I want to call into question. The limits of rationality, in other words, will be the boundaries of our emotional engagements in the world. One can, of course, think one’s way beyond these, but then it is no longer rationality that is in question but rather the mental health of the philosopher.⁴

The Concept(s) of Rationality

Philosophical celebrations of rationality, despite their apparent solidarity (except for a few “irrationalist” eccentricities), are not all of a kind. Richard Rorty rightly insists, in accordance with his characteristic nominalism, that “rationality is not a *thing*,” to be Socratically defined or characterized in any singular way. I would say that it is one of those “essentially contested concepts” of philosophy (like “freedom,” “truth,” and “justice”) which plays a primarily polemical as well as a normative role in our conversations, despite the “descriptive” characterizations that are readily available in behavioral theory and the social sciences. The question is how the term is being used in any particular context and what distinctions are being made—for often the real message is political and not merely conceptual and conveyed only by implication. Indeed, even the most routine distinctions are or ought to be suspect. For instance, there are indeed what we might call both “descriptive” and “normative” conceptions of rationality, which might be generally characterized as having a certain trait or property, on the one hand, and getting something right, on the other. But which of these traits or properties gets highlighted may itself constitute an explosive normative issue: for example, the capacity for reflective thought as a criterion not only for “rationality” but for social, moral, and political status. There are similar distinctions between ascriptions of rationality as a disposition and as an actual achievement; insisting that “*homo sapiens* is rational” is a way of characterizing a species-wide genetic propensity, which may or may not be developed in any given individual or group. But is it necessarily desirable—much less essential—that all such capacities in fact be developed, or might they be developed in very different ways? Alternatively, insisting that lawyers or

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physicians or philosophers are rational is not, presumably, to insist merely that they could or would be rational (for example, if they were better trained or paid more attention to what they were doing); it is to say that they *practice* a certain kind of thinking, follow certain procedures or methods of argumentation. One might also distinguish between theoretical and practical employments of reason—one aimed at “the truth” and the other at “right action” (or some less controversial notions that more humbly capture the difference between curiosity and agent urgency)—but between disposition and achievement is a much-disputed domain of political correctness, and, moreover, what we come to believe out of mere curiosity may well become the grounds for urgent action. So, too, in the practical realm one might distinguish (carefully!) between what has been called “instrumental” rationality—a means-to-an-end sort of thinking—and another sort of rationality concerning ultimate ends. But “instrumental rationality” is so often used in a post-Weberian sense as a philosophical and social “put-down” with unmistakable antiliberal implications and religious or utopian dogma waiting in the wings that we might well be advised to drop this overused terminology altogether. And, more philosophically, one might argue that the “ends and means” dichotomy that this terminology assumes and rigidifies runs counter to some of the best thinking in ethics, notably Aristotle’s conception of the virtues (which are neither ends nor means in the usual utilitarian sense), and too easily relegates all of what we (usually) call “rationality” to the merely “instrumental.” Indeed, some of the leading theories of practical reason, which are unabashedly “procedural,” might well fall under such an unflattering indictment. In the realm of theory one might similarly want to distinguish between procedural rationality (clarity and careful use of evidence and argumentation, for instance) and that sort of rationality which claims veridical or apodictic certainty as such (for example, certain forms of “*nous*” or “eidetic intuition”). The problem with such a notion is that it would make the “rational” conclusion correct more or less by definition. And so, perhaps, one cannot make such distinctions without quickly “erasing” them (as Derrida would put it), for the grounds of apodictic claims are often the procedures that lead to them just as, it has often been argued (for example, by Miguel Unamuno as well as John Dewey), that all theory and theoretical results are ultimately practice-driven and practice-defined. But, nevertheless, such distinctions serve a valuable function, and glossing over them causes confusion. Consider, for example, the delicate balance between procedural and eidetic rationality in Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. Husserl gives us elaborate procedures, but ultimately, he tells us, if we do not “see” the truth, there is nothing more to argue. (So, too, on the side of “irrationality,” we might weigh the mystics’ protracted preparations with the seeming passivity of the mystical experience.)

There are many more such distinctions that can be made here, and at the risk of becoming tedious I want to explore a bit more of the varied geography of the concept(s) of rationality by cataloging a number of conceptions that philosophers and other surveyors of "human nature" sometimes seem to have in mind, often causing much mischief and confusion.

First, four basic meanings:

1. Rationality is having (believing on the basis of, acting on) reasons (including bad reasons). The only irrational behavior, on such an account, would be the existentialist "gratuitous act"—although even that is typically celebrated for a reason, that is, its lack of reason (Raskolnikov's inescapable dilemma).
2. Rationality is consistency, within (but also across) domains (there need be no constraints on soundness or, for that matter, even sense; a paranoid and an occultist may be perfectly rational on this account).
3. Rationality is having the *right* reasons (Jean-Paul Sartre would deny that action is ever rational, in this sense, although it is obvious that he would defend the possibility of rational action on either of the preceding accounts).
4. Rationality is right behavior or right thinking. "Rationality" is thus used in a degenerate sense in which the word becomes a mere honorific, a term of praise (like "reasonable") which has no specific criteria or content (acting rationally is doing what is correct according to practice, ritual, or method).

Ever since Weber, "rationality" has become a favorite word in the social sciences, and such technical usages as the following are often employed (or denied) by philosophers as well:

5. Rationality is being able to learn behavior without trial and error, to "figure things out" (the psychologists' definition).
6. Rationality is the ability to use tools, including signs and notations (the anthropologists' definition). One might further distinguish here between oral and written cultures and the dramatically different roles of written signs in literate cultures (a point perhaps exaggerated but by no means unimportant in the work of Derrida and a few of his followers).
7. Rationality is the ability to manipulate nature (technology as rationality: the technocrats definition). This is the meaning most often under attack from Heidegger and other critics of merely "instrumental" rationality.
8. Rationality is economic maximization (the economists' definition). This is, of course, the favorite current target of contemporary critics of "instrumental" rationality. Getting what we want may be tolerable,

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even rational, but when what we want is sheer financial success, rationality seems to have gotten derailed. We will come back to this in the category in which it properly belongs—not economics, but ethics.

9. Rationality is the proper organization of society (“for what?” remains an open question) (the sociologists’ definition). For an individual in an organization, rationality is the ability to organize and manage people.
10. Rationality is the ability to pass on what one has learned, actively to create a social context (rationality as culture as such).
11. Rationality (also in groups) is the ability to pass on what one has experienced, to create a history (this does not entail that “history is rational”—a teleological conception). One can, of course, insist that rationality is this historical self-consciousness, and even that it is (to one who studies it appropriately, in Hegel’s “Bacchanalian revel”) rational. But then one should always sober up with a little Dostoyevsky: “one can say anything one likes about history, except that it is rational.”
12. Rationality is “good management,” efficiency, and effectiveness (the management science definition).
13. Rationality is a faculty: having (or being able to learn) concepts, the ability to learn and manipulate symbols, the ability to learn and use language (this is the most usual arena of debate concerning the alleged “uniqueness” of the human mind).

With the centrality of language, we move into more philosophical senses, as we become aware of and articulate our reasons.

14. Rationality is the ability to understand and employ certain kinds of language, language with syntax and self-reference (most apes lack both syntax and, in the perhaps overly narrow sense, the ability to refer to themselves through language; gestures, of course, do not count philosophically, no matter what Wittgenstein may have said). The ability to employ abstractions is essential, according to many philosophical accounts (even those that deny the reality of such abstractions, like the medieval and modern nominalists).
15. Rationality is the ability to reason, not just to manipulate abstract symbols (as advertisers do) and use syntactical language (as politicians and bad poets do) but to formulate arguments (and, at least sometimes, *sound* arguments). Logic and consistency thus become necessary (but not necessarily sufficient) conditions for rationality (I once heard a colleague claim, during the hotter days of the “Cold War,” that the Chinese could not be rational because their logic did not include *modus ponens*).⁵
16. Rationality is autonomy, the capability or the practice of figuring things out for oneself, without merely following or imitating others,

without one's thoughts being determined by the opinions of others or (more radical) without being limited to the conceptual framework of any particular culture—"to think for oneself." How does one do this?

17. Rationality is a measure of large-scale integration, consistency across broad and often abstract domains. This may or may not include completeness (much less proofs of completeness), nor need it require all-embracing unity. On this account, Kant's philosophy might be defended as rational despite his drastic separation of the domains of knowledge and action ("nature" and "freedom"), although it should be added that Kant himself considered it obligatory to unify the two (thus the more obscure aspects of his third *Critique*), and his followers (notably Fichte and Hegel) insisted that Kant's "system" failed to be rational on just these grounds.
18. Rationality is a technique, a particular way of thinking, of entertaining possibilities (much restricted version: to think like a philosopher). Rationality is disputation (in ancient Chinese philosophy, Mo-tzu's "*pien*").
19. Rationality is a particular set of philosophical procedures (much disputed), enabling one to grasp reality *as such*.
20. Rationality is the ability to grasp reality as such (to "penetrate nature" in science; to embrace "being as such" in phenomenology and metaphysics); it is not just a set of procedures enabling one to do so. Rationality is veridical, an ontological guarantee.
21. Rationality is a kind of transcendental ability (not the only one); this may be identical to (19) and (20) above, but can be more modestly interpreted as the ability to make philosophical and other general claims which go beyond experience (one can make such transcendental claims without insisting that they capture reality as such, see, for example, Kant).

But "rationality" is of particular interest in ethics:

22. Rationality is autonomy, the capability or the practice of figuring out what to do for oneself, not merely following or imitating others (Kant's "heteronomy"), not being persuaded by the opinions of others and (more problematic) without being limited to the conceptual framework of any particular culture. Kant's "practical reason" (and its associated notion of the noumenal, autonomous, or, to use Rawls' term, "unencumbered" self) is the paradigm.
23. Rationality is autonomy, but here as freedom from nature, the ability to will contrary to one's natural inclinations and appetites (for example, sexual prohibitions and culinary restraint). Again, the supposition is some quasi-Kantian (or Christian) unnatural (noumenal) self. In its extreme incarnation, rationality as autonomy is what Nietzsche calls "the ascetic ideal" (an ideal which he eviscerates), the wholesale denial of one's natural appetites and desires.

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24. Rationality is resolve (“will power,” control), often related to (23) even in Nietzsche.
25. Rationality is maximizing preferences (the theoretical game as well as the economists’ definition). In ethics, it is the doctrine of egoism or, writ large, rationality as utilitarianism. There is, of course, an enormous literature on this notion of rationality, including the entire corpus of classical or at least neoclassical economics and the voluminous writings on the several varieties of utilitarianism. All that needs to be mentioned here, however, is the controversial status of *all* such notions of rationality, whether based on self-interest narrowly conceived or “enlightened,” whether hedonistic or preference-based.
26. Rationality is having the *right* preferences (for example, long-term prudence). This is an enlightened modification of what is above, but such a view goes considerably beyond utilitarianism and its variations. For example, this would seem to fit the Aristotelian approach to ethics, simply knowing the right things to want (and not want). The Sanskrit notion of “*dharma*” would also be appropriate here.
27. Rationality is *not egoistic* (for example, having a sense of compassion, altruism, fairness, concern for the public good). This is a direct contrast to the self-maximization (however enlightened) account above.
28. Rationality is “disinterested” or “dispassionate” (the “ideal spectator”). This is, emphatically, not the same as above!

And, in an essay on existentialism, we should not forget:

29. Rationality is brooding self-consciousness, existential angst rendered ontological (another philosophical speciality).

With the recent turn toward “communitarianism,” we find ourselves facing (at least) two very different ethical formulations, both very ancient and very modern:

30. Rationality is “fitting in” (rationality as a purely cultural construct): believing what one is supposed to believe, in some particular community. (Where are the limits of such obligations?) Rationality is authority. This is, of course, the contrary of autonomy (although some limited encouragement of autonomy is possible *within* the culture)—Kant’s “heteronomy.” Rationality is consensus and agreement (cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, and Richard Rorty’s “solidarity”).
31. Rationality is tolerance, a sense of pluralism and difference (Richard Rorty’s benign and promising but eccentric usage). Rationality is not a guarantee of truth or correctness but is an acceptance of differences, a refraining from excessive concern about the “objectivity” of one’s beliefs. One may, however, express a willingness to reason, to expand one’s outlook and incorporate (or at least comprehend) the other.⁶

And finally:

32. Rationality is reasonableness (versus emotionalism). This is often confused with many of the meanings above, as if emotion as such were devoid of reason, concepts, symbolization and argumentation, autonomy, will, effectiveness, insight, fairness, culture, and history. This is the critical contrast that I want to explore (and explode) in the rest of this essay. It has a long history: rationality versus emotion, reason versus the passions. I want to suggest that the antagonism between rationality and emotion needs to be reconsidered, and the priority of dispassionate (or passionless) reason deeply questioned.

And with this in mind, let me add an eccentric suggestion to our list:

33. What if rationality were to mean having the *right* emotions, caring about the right sorts of things. What if rationality were, after all, a matter of emotion?

Rationality and Emotion

I have tested your patience with this elaborate list (it could be made longer) in order both to exclude many of these meanings of “rationality” from consideration here and to indicate how confusion between them, in the works of both advocates and existentialists, renders discussions of rationality and of our emotional lives (which is to say, our lives) unintelligible. Insofar as “rationality” means *reasonableness* in ethics, it is typically contrasted with emotionalism and “irrationality.” If our concern is the idea of living well and wisely, this contrast issues in a conceptual disaster. We do not praise but are highly suspicious of people who are cold and calculating—*Star Trek’s* Dr. Spock, for example. (A common theme of horror movies such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is the depiction of otherwise “normal” humans whose status as monsters is marked by their lack of emotion.) In Camus’ best-known novel, *The Stranger*, the odd central character is distinguished most of all by his lack of emotion—no grief upon his mother’s death, no disgust in the presence of his chauvinist, slimeball pimp neighbor Raymond, no love in his intimate conversations with his girlfriend Marie, no fear in the presence of a potential assassin with a knife, no regret for a murder that might easily have been avoided. But it is this lack of emotion (which many of my students find “cool,” even heroic) that makes Meursault “an inhuman monster wholly without a moral sense” in the words of the overly zealous prosecutor at his trial. It is our emotions that make us human. To be reasonable is to have the right emotions, and to be rational includes having the right emotional premises. For example, Robert Nozick argues, at the beginning of *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, against those who insist that animals have no rights: “Animals count for something. . . . It is difficult to prove this. (It is also difficult to prove that people count for something!).” Of course, several similar

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rejoinders have been advanced against Nozick's rights-based theory as a whole.

And yet, throughout the history of philosophy, we find a portrait of the human soul or psyche in which the emotions play at best an inferior (at worst a devilish) role. It is a portrait that is well summarized in the image of a "*Steppenwolf*," poeticized early in this century by the East-West writer Hermann Hesse as half human, half beast. The human half gets characterized in terms of rationality, the bestial as irrational, emotional, uncivilized, primitive. The two halves are at war with one another, although a few philosophers have expanded the duality into a trinity and others have suggested musical metaphors such as "harmony"—typically of the wise master/obedient slave variety. (Aesop: reason should be the master of the passions. Hume: reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions.) But the antagonism remains, and even in Hume emotion is relegated to the realm of the "impressions" and is denied intelligent status (despite his very sophisticated model of the causal role of ideas in emotion). My argument here, briefly stated, is that emotions already "contain" reason, and practical reason is circumscribed and defined by emotion. (Nietzsche: "as if every passion didn't contain its quantum of reason!") Our emotions *situate* us in the world, and so provide not so much the motive for rationality—much less its opposition—but rather its very framework.

Every emotion involves what Robert Gordon designates a conceptual "structure" of judgments that can be well wrought or foolish, warranted or unwarranted, correct or incorrect.⁷ Anger involves judgments of blame; jealousy includes judgments about a potential threat or loss. Love involves evaluative judgments, typically overblown, but so does hatred. Grief involves recognition of a loss, and vengeance—oft maligned in philosophy—already involves a small-scale theory of justice, an "eye for an eye," or what Kant, less violently but more ambiguously, called "equality." In all of these examples, one can readily recognize what can go wrong in the emotion—and consequently what is required for it to go right. In anger one can be confused about the facts. He or she is still angry, but wrongfully so. And if one leapt to conclusions or did not examine the readily available evidence, he or she is foolishly so. One can be right about the facts but wrong about the harm done or the blameworthiness of the person with whom one is angry. (The "intensity" of anger, I want to suggest, has much more to do with the harshness of such evaluations than with the physiological accompaniments of the emotion.) One can be right about the facts and justified about the warrant for anger and yet go wrong in its expression, misdirecting it (a common problem with vengeance) or overdoing it. (The irrationality of emotions is often a fault in performance or timing rather than a mistaken emotion as such.)

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The fault may be the aim or purpose of the emotion, what Jean-Paul

Sartre calls an emotion's *finalité*. But Sartre then goes on to accuse all the emotions of escapism, of being strategies for avoiding difficult circumstances. Similar analyses are available for love and grief and every other emotion, even the seemingly simplest of them. Fear, for example, is not just a rush of adrenalin but the recognition of a danger, and one can be wrong about the danger, its imminence or its seriousness. Fear can be irrational, and so, therefore, it can be rational.

What is essential in this analysis for our understanding of rationality is that the concepts and judgments that are constitutive of our emotions are in turn constitutive of the criteria for rationality as well. If an offense is worthy of anger it thus becomes rational (that is, warranted) to be angry about it, and if one argues that it is even more rational (for example, more effective in terms of self-esteem or common prudence) *not* to get angry, then that only shows, I want to suggest, how firmly entangled are the life of the emotions and the various meanings of rationality. Indeed, rationality begins to look more and more like emotional prudence, presupposing, of course, the right emotions. The point is not just to defend the rationality of the emotions, a now well-established and much-mulled-over thesis,⁸ but to establish what one might call the emotional grounding of rationality. What I want to reject here is the now-prevalent idea that rational criteria are simply the presuppositions of emotion or the external standards by which emotions and their appropriateness may be judged. That would leave standing the idea of a rational framework *within which* the emotions may be appropriate or inappropriate, warranted or unwarranted, wise or foolish. I want to suggest rather that emotions constitute the framework (or frameworks) of rationality itself. Of course, a single emotion does not do this, any more than a single correct calculation makes a student intelligent. A single emotion (or even an entire sequence of emotions) may be dictated by character, the circumstances, and the overall cultural context, but altogether our emotions (appropriate to the general circumstances) dictate that context (as well as character). What I have in mind here is a holistic conception of the personality (do we really have to talk about "the mind" here?) in which the whole field of one's experience is defined and framed by his or her engagements and attachments, in which truly "dispassionate" judgment is more often pathological than rational, and detachment more likely signals alienation than objectivity. Heidegger's punsical conception of *mood* (*Stimmung*) as our mode of "being tuned" (*Bestimmen*) to the world is instructive here, both because of its welcome shift in emphasis from detached knowing to holistic personal caring (*Sorge*) and also because of the not insubstantial fact that he emphasizes moods—which are general, diffuse, and devoid of any determinate object—rather than, for example, love, an emotion whose character is marked first of all by its particularity and attachment. But what is important about both moods and emotions is the fact that

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they thoroughly permeate our experience and they are not, as several honorable ancient views would have it, interruptions, intrusions, or brief bouts of madness that get in the way of the otherwise calm and cool transparency of rational objectivity.

The idea that emotions as such are not rational thus begins with a basic misunderstanding of both the nature of emotions and the nature of rationality, and the idea that emotions as such are irrational is a confusion of certain sorts of specialized procedures—appropriate perhaps to the seminar room and the negotiating table—with rationality as such. But even in the seminar and at the negotiating table, it is caring that counts first of all, and as a matter of strategy, it is obvious that even as a negotiating tool emotion is often appropriate and, well used, effective. Love is sometimes said to be irrational because it overevaluates the beloved. But here as always we should be very suspicious: is the enthusiastic idealization of someone about whom one cares a great deal a falsification and thereby irrational, or is it part and parcel of any intimate connection, recognizing another as more important than others (“to me”) and being engaged in life rather than being a merely disinterested, dispassionate spectator? So, too, with almost all of the emotions, including many of those which have typically been dubbed “negative,” even “Sins,” one must be very careful about dismissing their admittedly biased vision of the world as merely “subjective” or “irrational,” for what is the alternative—not caring at all (“*apatheia*”)? No affections or offenses whatever? No commitments or attachments—the dubiously “rational” approach to a life without loss suggested by various ascetics and religious thinkers (for example, the Arab philosopher al-Kindi in the ninth century)? These are the targets of Nietzsche’s reknowned attack on the hypocrisy of asceticism in Part III of his *Genealogy of Morals*, where he claims that ascetics (like everyone else) seek power and self-assertion but obtain it, as it were, backwards, by stealth and self-denial. But what sort of person would be incapable of anger or any sense of “getting even” when offended, not as a matter of strategy or in pursuit of higher goals but just by virtue of “reasonableness” alone? It would be either a person with pathologically low self-esteem or a saint—but are not saints to be characterized precisely by their very rarity and, perhaps, irrationality? (Consider Dostoyevsky’s well-known candidate, Prince Mishkin in *The Idiot*.) And even then, are not most of our saints recognized as such not by their cosmic indifference but rather by their extreme *caring*—about their people, about their religion, about the very rationality (certainly not to be confused with the “objectivity”) of the world? Caring about the right things—one’s friends and family, one’s compatriots and neighbors, one’s culture and environment, and, ultimately, the world—is what defines rationality. It is not reason (as opposed to emotion) that allows us to extend our reach to the universal but rather the expansive scope of the

emotions themselves. (I here enter into a dispute with otherwise kindred spirits, for example, David Hume and Peter Singer, in his *Expanding Circle*, where abstract reason as “impersonality” is forced to take over the limited domain of the emotions. As Hume himself brutally noted, why should reason care?) What one cares about is defined by one’s conception of the world, but one’s conception of the world is itself defined by the scope and objects of one’s emotional cares and concern.

Not only is every emotion structured by concepts and judgments, most of them learned (at least in their details and applications), but every emotion is also engaged in a strategy of psychological as well as physical self-preservation. Thus it is readily understandable that emotions should first of all emerge as self-interested, even selfish, then be concerned with kin and kinship rather than a larger sense of community, chauvinistic rather than cosmic. But part of cultivation, or “civilization,” is internalizing the larger concepts of history, humanity, and religion, conceptions of morality and ethics that go beyond provincial self-interests. But this is not to say that the emotional nature of these concerns is replaced by something more abstract and impersonal; the emotions and the personal themselves become more expansive. Emotions are not just “reactions,” and although they undoubtedly have an evolutionary history that precedes the arrival of the human species by hundreds of millions of years, they have evolved not only along with but hand in hand with the evolution of reason and rationality, which means in part an awareness of the larger human and global context in which all of our fates are engaged and our interests involved. There is, however, nothing particularly human about emotion as such (a dog or a horse can be as rightfully angry or sad as a person), although there are particularly human emotions—for instance, romantic love and moral indignation. Indeed, some of those particularly human emotions—like religious passion and scientific curiosity—are precisely the passions which are typically designated as proof of our rationality.

Emotion, Rationality, and Culture

Among the Utkuikhalingmiut (“Utku”) Eskimos of the Canadian Northwest Territories, anger is a genuine rarity. In her book *Never In Anger*, anthropologist Jean L. Briggs suggests that even in circumstances that we would find intolerably frustrating or offensive, the Utku do not get angry. Where we would be resentful or even furious, the Utku are merely resigned. Anger is unreasonable (the word in Utku translates as “childishness”).

Among the Ifaluk of Micronesia, murder is unknown, and the most serious incident of aggression last year, according to Catherine Lutz, who has been studying them, was when one man touched another’s shoulder. He was subjected to a severe fine, a reasonable penalty for extremely unreasonable behavior.

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The Tahitians were described two hundred years ago by one of Captain Cook's officers as "slow to anger and soon appeased." Today, psychiatrist-turned-anthropologist Robert Levy finds that, even after centuries of European fantasies and interference, they are still slow to anger and soon appeased. Unlike the Utku, however, they have a rich and elaborate vocabulary for anger. They talk about it all the time, and they fear it, as a demon. Anger is the epitome of irrationality, unreason incarnate as the devil.

Sitting in rush-hour traffic on Storrow Drive in Boston, in contrast, one finds that anger is neither rare nor slow nor easily appeased. Indeed one would not very quickly be refuted in the hypothesis that ire is, in the heterogeneous and transient subculture that defines Boston traffic today, the dominant passion of life. Flying through rush-hour traffic in New Delhi, in contrast again, one is struck by the emotional calm in the midst of vehicular chaos, the apparent acceptance of traffic patterns that seem (to a first-time American visitor) utterly irrational.

It is often said, as an expression of both profundity and platitude, that people are, "deep down"—that is, in terms of their basic emotions—all the same. Thus, the claim that is made on behalf of reason on a priori grounds is often defended with regard to emotions on a purely empirical (biological) basis. Customs, laws, governments, mating rituals, table manners, and religious beliefs may vary from culture to culture, but emotions, at least, are said to be the same from Mount Abu to lower Manhattan, with variations appropriate to traffic and circumstances. Of course, what causes a particular emotion (for example, anger) might well differ from culture to culture, as will the ease with which some emotions are triggered and the modes of expression that are thought to be appropriate. But, as psychologist Gardiner Lindzey insisted when he summed up this old idea in 1954, "emotions, as biological events, are the same the world over." Sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, often quoted in such matters, has explained the supposed universality of emotions by noting that emotions are located in the "lower" and least variable parts of the brain. But brains and biology are not all that there is to emotions. The various structures and strategies mentioned in the preceding section suggest that, whatever the common neurophysiological ground of emotions, the cultivation of emotion requires detailed cultural training, not only in the language we use to recognize and describe our emotions but in the concepts and judgments that actually constitute them. "Not only ideas but emotions, too, are cultural artifacts," writes Princeton anthropologist Clifford Geertz, propounding a theme he has pursued for many years. ("Complete rubbish," replies Cambridge dean of anthropologists Edmund Leach, thus opening up a new round of emotional hostilities in the perennial debate about the nature of "human nature.") But although emotions clearly have a biological substrate (which does not, by the way,

entitle us to conclude that we are biologically all the same), one of the most verified facts about the human brain is its malleability to learning and experience. And though it is true that certain “lower” (note well!) components of the brain are less malleable than the “higher” cerebral centers, it is simply a fallacy to conclude that because the former are necessarily involved in emotion (damage to those parts of the brain result in serious affective disorders) the nature of emotion is to be found wholly there and not as well in the same quarters as cultivation and civilization.

There is, in addition to our (more or less) shared biology and our diverse cultures, such a thing as the “human condition”—the fact that we all are born into families, are vulnerable to pain, disease, and death, the fact that we need and want to be with other people and, the most significant single fact of all, that we all *know* these things (no matter how we may resist or rationalize). So, too, we all share a (more or less) common physiology, we all speak some language or other, and we all have some sense of self and others—whether in accordance with extreme American individualism or extreme communitarian tribalism. But beyond this sparse outline of humanity, it is the differences that seem to us significant, not so much the gross similarities. It is the *meanings* of our emotions that count, and these meanings—which mean the emotions themselves—are cultivated in different ways in different circumstances providing different frameworks of what is rational and what is not. Consider the difference between a society obsessed with efficiency and productivity and a society more impressed with social harmony, a society that celebrates the eccentric or exceptional individual and a society that demands conformity and consensus. The “human condition” may remain the same, but the concept of rational action will be very different indeed and the conditions for mutual understanding possibly quite difficult.

Emotions, in other words, are part and parcel of the structure of a society, indeed, they are more “in” the social realm than they belong to the much-touted private realm of personal experience so glorified by Descartes and so many overly introspective empiricists.¹⁰ Emotions evolve along with a way of life, according to which some activities are encouraged, others forbidden; some things are said to be delightful, others repulsive; some people are attractive and to be admired and courted, others are to be shunned or made fun of. Thus fear of snakes, or mice, or thunder may be rational in some societies but not in others, and “falling in love” will be sanctioned and encouraged in some cultures and not in others. Ambition is to be praised in most of America but it is a target of scorn and contempt in much of the world (as in Shakespeare’s contemptuous characterization of Cassius, in *Julius Caesar*). But Hume overly separated the ends (emotions) and the means (rationality), as if emotions were not themselves already strategies and as if rationality were nothing but a calculative strategy and not itself already situated and

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defined in an emotionally defined social context. What counts as “rational,” accordingly, is based on a system of such emotional premises which, as Hume suggested, provide the “ends” which any system of rationality must serve. But Hume overly separated the ends (emotions) and the means (rationality), as if emotions were not themselves already strategies and as if rationality were not itself already situated in an emotionally defined social context. It is culture that defines both what counts as rational and what is a legitimate emotion. Indeed, I want to argue that “legitimate emotion” is the cornerstone of Practical Reason. Kant’s “inclinations” should not have been severed from the will and reason (nor should “nature” and “freedom” have been so separated either—but that is a different conference). Rationality is defined (not only limited) by the emotions.

It remains and should remain an open question (not to be solved a priori) whether there are rational or emotional (or rational-emotional) structures that transcend, and cross, cultures and whether there are standards or measures (for example, “utility”) by which alternative rational-emotional structures can be evaluated. In the broadest of terms, “the human condition” would seem to provide the possibility of such a measure, based upon the universality of the uncertainty if not the fear of pain and death, of the protection people must provide for their children, and of the fear and then the resentment of public humiliation, but one can find wide variations on all of these themes, and all of them may be denied by a misleading rationality which pretends to detach itself from all such contexts and attachments, justified by the atrocious philosophical presumption that if it can’t be rationally demonstrated then it must be rationally doubted.

Our emotions provide a socially constructed “conceptual framework” in which the forms of engagement and caring emerge as the dominant *Gestalten*. It is within the bounds of engagement—being part of a community (even as the local oddball) and by presuming one’s care and concern for other people (even if what one cares about is mainly one’s own reputation)—that the rules of rationality are constructed to protect and preserve a set of emotional practices. Hume’s famous claim that by reason alone he would prefer the destruction of half the world to the pricking of his finger shows just what is wrong with an emotionally detached conception of reason. Contra Kant, practical reason begins with caring, fearing, hoping, and (to bring Nietzsche in again) resenting as well. Emotions are not the masters of reason nor are they reason’s slaves. The dichotomy is a false one, and with it our conception of rationality has become impoverished.

Cross-Cultural Rationality and the Transcendental Pretense: “Relativism”

There is, however, ample room to consider “rationality” writ large. I have not argued that rationality can be reduced to some complex of
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emotions or that emotions are nothing but reason, nor do I take it as anything more (or less) than an empirical suspicion that there are canons of rationality that are something more than local practices and that there are virtually always grounds for understanding and negotiation. (The dogmatic belief to the contrary, that there *cannot* be such canons or such grounds, is no less pretentious and probably much more dangerous than the more usual philosophical belief that there *must* be such canons and grounds.) Those canons of rationality and those grounds for common understanding, however, should not be sought in the world of mathematics and abstract reason but rather in the realm of emotions, common if not mutual experiences and similar attachments and engagements. In the name of rationality, however, we have cultivated an impressive set of procedures and practices which systematically *exclude* emotions. (The scientific method and the language of logic and mathematics are two familiar, but by no means the only, examples.) But the very fact that such “objectivity” requires some procedure or other suggests that the exclusion of emotion requires a special context and a special effort to be justified. Rationality thus construed is not some general human or social faculty but is defined within some specific practice. The rationality of an action, a belief (or an emotion) within a practice, is defined by what Alasdair MacIntyre calls the “internal goods” of the practice (playing well, for example). The rationality of a practice itself, however—that is, whether it is worth pursuing or not—is not defined or determined by the practice but is within a larger context. It is the dispassionate practice that requires special justification in terms of our overall emotional engagements, and not—as in most philosophers—the other way around. It is detached philosophical reason that should be confined to quarters and defined *only* by the various practices which give it meaning; it does not embrace, much less define, the rationality (or irrationality) of ordinary (or extraordinary) life. Philosophy—which is itself only a practice (or a divergent set of practices)—has to recognize that there is some measure beyond all practices—and certainly beyond philosophy. That measure, which so tempts philosophers to formulate the notion of “rationality” to enclose it, is *life*, that ill-defined set of emotional attachments and meanings by which we measure the success and significance of *all* of our more particular activities—that is, as soon as we lift our eyes out of the tunnels of our own ambitions and arguments.¹¹ It is time to reject the old search for a “first philosophy” and all of those various attempts to reconstruct human experience a priori and without grounding in the actual demands and contingencies of everyday life. Plato and Aristotle set us off on the wrong track by making the good life sound overly rational (indeed, defined it as rational), but the fact is that life and “flourishing” lay far beyond the rational.¹² The human condition is by no means rational—as if that thesis ever really needed to be argued, but the attempt to rationalize it by separating out the essentially human (as rational) from the

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“condition” has occupied an enormous amount of philosophical effort over the ages. It is detached philosophical reason that should be confined to quarters and defined only by the various practices which give it meaning; it does not embrace, much less define, the rationality (or irrationality) of ordinary (or extraordinary) life. It was against such efforts that Camus and Sartre so bitterly argued—Nietzsche embraced it with an odd cheerfulness—and it was with this in mind that they so aggressively attacked (or seemed to attack) the notion of rationality itself. But the passion they encouraged in turn was never devoid of reason, and rationality in some of its many senses is as essentially human as existence itself. Existence entails emotions and thereby suggests an essence, whatever transcendental aspirations it may thereby entertain.

I have insisted that it remain an open question whether there are universal emotions, and, accordingly, I take it to be an empirical question—not, as philosophers would have it, a matter of the definition of reason as such—which of the notions of rationality applies or might be embedded in every culture. There are aspects of the human condition that may mandate that some aspects of our emotional lives seem essentially transcendental—religious faith, aesthetic enjoyment, romantic love, or the search for justice—but even a casual study of any of these profound topics betrays local ethnocentricity and potentially conflicting differences. Indeed, do not the words “religious,” “aesthetic,” and “romantic”—as well as “justice”—betray a distinctively modernist, Western sensibility? I want to end this discussion, however, not by harping on the prevalence of ethnocentricity in philosophy, with its definition of “rationality” as universality, but by returning to the theme that inevitably emerges from such culture-bound discussions, and that is the dreaded theme of “relativism.” If emotions and therefore rationality are “relative” to cultural formations and particular social conditions, does that mean that cross-cultural conversation and negotiation are impossible, that international conflicts are unresolvable except by force, that what seems to us to be the grossest cruelty or immorality cannot be criticized except by way of a kind of cultural imperialism?

Relativism has become a scare word, like “liberal” in American politics or “heretic” or “atheist” in the religious conflicts of the past. But what does this mean? Even Richard Rorty portrays it as a nonsensical position (“mindless defensive reflexes,” a *reductio*, “a subordination of truth to edification,” and “one who lacks moral seriousness”—note the scare quotes),¹³ although his philosophy would seem to embrace it. Alasdair MacIntyre fights tooth and nail against it, but in doing so provides convincing arguments on behalf of relativism in spite of himself, thus fueling his liturgical lament that we have lapsed into the relativistic barbarism of a new (Weberian) dark age. Donald Davidson rejects the premise (“alternative conceptual frameworks”) upon which the claim to relativism is

based, but in so doing he also trivializes the difficulty with which even slightly different cultures try (or do not try) to understand one another. Relativism is typically dismissed with the sophistic argument that borrows (heavily) from the famous liar's paradox: if what the relativist is saying is true, is it absolutely true?—in which case there is at least one absolute truth. If, on the other hand, it is not true, then what is he or she going on about? The irrelevance of this familiar argument has often been demonstrated, for instance, in defending Nietzsche's related notion of "perspectivism." But here I want only to draw our attention to a difference in metaphor: there is the pretense of looking over a domain from no point in particular, and there is looking out from a particular perspective with a horizon beyond which one cannot see. The former position, which I have elsewhere called "the transcendental pretense," is highly problematic and vulnerable to a number of self-referential paradoxes. The latter is rather a position of perceptual and intellectual humility, insisting that one is always engaged in a particular context and that there are things that one does not and perhaps cannot know. I want to suggest that what relativism amounts to is a statement of humility rather than a transcendental overview. It does not give up any claim to preference or argument, and a thoroughgoing relativist need not therefore condone fascism or cruelty or gross injustice. To insist on relativism is not to deny or undermine a culture's own commitments but only to say that there is always an open invitation to dialogue and that most differences turn out not to be of the morally problematic variety (typically exaggerated by antirelativists) but rather cultural differences which readily admit to a "live and let live" policy of mutual tolerance. To say that rationality is relative is only to say that there are different ways of conceiving of and finding meaning in the world, different ways of structuring society and different ways of leading a happy, meaningful life (if that phrase can stand such cross-cultural stretching). I do not find this thesis objectionable. I worry about those who do.

NOTES

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1 – *Rationality in Question: On Eastern and Western Views of Rationality*, ed. Schlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), p. 219.

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- 2 – See D. P. Chattopadhyaya's contribution to this issue of *Philosophy East and West*, titled "Rationality: Transparent, Cultural, and Transcendental."
- 3 – I am by no means as irritable or accusative, I should add, as my wonderful ex-colleague David Glidden, who in a fit of populist rage once argued that "many in our profession are successful reasoners precisely because their emotions are defective." An accomplished Plato scholar, he argued that "many of us follow Plato's path because we are far more comfortable with our reasoning than we are with our own feelings" (from "Philosophers on a Train," his paper read at the Portland A. P. A. meetings in 1988).
- 4 – See Michael Stocker on "dissociation," in "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories" in *Plural and Conflicting Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- 5 – See Roger T. Ames, "Chinese Rationality: An Oxymoron?" *Journal Of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 9:1 (September–December 1992).
- 6 – Rorty ultimately does not deny the mutual comprehensibility or commensurability of distinct cultures. Here he (mistakenly, I think) follows Donald Davidson's well-known polemic against Quine, "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." See, for example, Anindita Balslev's book, *Cultural Otherness: Correspondence with Richard Rorty* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1991).
- 7 – I am often accused of overintellectualizing emotions by analyzing them in terms of "judgments." But what I mean by "judgment" is (as in Kant) to be contrasted with, not subsumed under, the categories of the intellect. In a more modern context, one might compare this usage with Jon Elster's conception of "judgment" as the capacity to synthesize vast and diffuse information that bears on the problem at hand. Reference is to Robert M. Gordon, *The Structure of Emotions: Investigations in Cognitive Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
- 8 – See, e.g., Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), and Patricia S. Greenspan, *Emotions and Reason: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
- 9 – See L. E. Goodman on "Medieval Jewish and Islamic Philosophers," in *Rationality in Question*, pp. 95–99.
- 10 – Thus the enormous persuasiveness of the "social constructionist" theorists in both philosophy (e.g., Rom Harré) and psychology (e.g., James Averill), who argue that the emotions themselves and not

just emotional expressions and emotional language are defined by social conventions. What such theories tend to neglect, however, are the phenomenological aspects of emotions, precisely those aspects highlighted by the more experiential (and Cartesian) existentialist—notably, Sartre.

- 11 – Cf. Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, the short introduction to Part B, and, of course, Fichte and Schopenhauer and, later, Nietzsche and Heidegger.
- 12 – The best and most extensive scrutiny of Plato and Aristotle on this score, using pre-Socratic Greek tragedy as her contrast, is Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). It is this thesis that the early romantics and existentialists raised once again against the hyperrationalism of the enlightenment. It is not just the existentialists who defended such a thesis in modern times, of course; one can also cite the more sensitive American pragmatists and Hegel, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.
- 13 – Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 13, 178, 373, 376.