ET TU QUOQUE? RATIONALISM RECONSIDERED

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(1) Is it rational to be rational? Can rationality be rationally defended? Few philosophical questions seem more fundamental. One significant contemporary argument answers these questions with a resounding "no". It is usually termed the *tu quoque* argument (the you also argument). It holds that rationalism, in the sense of the acceptance of the imperative "Be rational," is, like religion, ultimately a matter of faith. The rationalist cannot afford to throw stones at the woman of faith, for the rationalist is herself a woman of faith.[1]

(2) The *tu quoque* argument aims at confronting the rationalist with a dilemma. Either (a) it is rational to be rational or (b) it is not rational to be rational. If (a) then the rationalist in arguing for rationalism must argue in a circle and hence beg the question. In defending (a) she will employ the very rationality that is brought into question. If (b) on the other hand, rationality becomes a matter of faith. If it is not rational to be rational, then why is the rationalist a rationalist? How can she justify her commitment to rationality? She can't. Rationality is simply something in which she has faith. Many rationalists, including critical rationalists like Sir Karl Popper, have felt constrained to accept (b). They admit that the desire to be rational and the commitment to rationality are irrational. What else can they do? After all, begging the question, alternative (a), appears to be an even greater evil.

(3) The question: "Is it rational to be rational?" looks to be a sensible

one. It is a good English sentence (as is its indicative transform: It is rational to be rational). But appearances can be deceiving. It can be argued that many English sentences though apparently meaningful give rise to paradox. A famous case comprises certain self-referential sentences, sentences which say of themselves that they are false. Consider the following (i) S is false, where S is the sentence, S is false. In this situation, S is false if S is true, and S is true if S is false. Something is wrong somewhere. (Notice that (ii) All English sentences are false is not a paradox, strictly speaking. It is simply false, self contradictory. Since (ii) is itself an English sentence, it too would have to be false, but if (ii) is false, then it is not the case that all English sentences are false. So, if (ii) is true it has to be false. Paradoxes can be neither true nor false.)

(4) Because of this kind of paradox, some philosophers have declared English and other natural languages unsuitable for scientific or profes-sional (including philosophical) purposes. What they attempt to do is substitute some improved or more ideal artificial language, for our natural languages. In the improved language, sentences giving rise to paradox are simply not formulable. This is, of course, not to say that the avoidance of paradox is the sole aim of so-called ideal or formal language philosophers in employing these languages.

(5) Paradoxical sentences are to be banned from improved languages, but this should not be accomplished in an ad hoc way. It should be the defensible linguistic rules of the language--themselves independently certified as reasonable or intelligible--which serve to do the banning. The rules should not be tailored primarily to avoid the paradoxes.

(6) What does the above detour into paradox and improved languages have to do with our problem? It is not difficult to see. The *tu quoque* does not confront us with a paradox, but simply with an uncomfortable situation, more exactly, a dilemma. It is obligatory to avoid paradoxes; it is simply desirable to avoid dilemmas. Dilemmas place us in situations we would do well to avoid. Our strategy is to show that the *tu quoque* dilemma should not arise and that in attempting to deal with the dilemma philosophers have been misled by natural language or more accurately, by a misunderstanding of natural language. Such claims are notoriously difficult to defend. In what follows we shall merely sketch such a defense.

(7) Our claim can be put thus: In a rationally constructed language, the *tu quoque* dilemma cannot arise. It cannot arise because the question "Is it rational to be rational?" only appears sensible. The question can only arise after the term rational has been introduced into the language. We construct a language from as near the ground up as possible. At some level, certainly not at the ground level, the term rational as a predicate of behavior, belief, or attitude will be introduced. Terms are introduced

primarily in two ways (A) by examples, positive and negative instances and (B) by rules of meaning (semantic rules). These rules regiment previous usage, they serve to sharpen the vague outlines of terms introduced by example. They may in some cases even revise the original application of the term.[2]

(8) Let us simplify things further and say that rational is a predicate applicable principally to behavior. It will be introduced by indicating cases of rational and non-rational behavior. (Maybe rational, non-rational, irrational would be the appropriate division.) Subsequently a rule will be forthcoming regimenting this usage. At the level in which rational is introduced our language will already contain terms for particular kinds of behavior. Questions whether a certain kind of behavior is rational or whether a piece of behavior is rational will then be formulable. BUT when rational is introduced, the term rational behavior will not belong to the linguistic apparatus. It will not be available to describe a kind of behavior we can talk about. The question as to whether rational behavior is itself rational cannot then sensibly be asked. Rational behavior can be said to include and exclude many things, but not rational behavior itself.

(9) Rational cannot sensibly be predicated of rational behavior. We can, however, introduce a new term rational* (and a new, extended notion of rationality, along with it). It can be predicated of rational behavior; it will then make sense to ask whether rational behavior is rational*. The answer we get would, of course, depends upon just how rational is introduced. It is here, anyway, that philosophically interesting questions about rules, practices and ways of life come to the fore.

(10) In philosophy no more than in life, should we scratch every itch. Not all questions formulated in English are worth addressing, or fruitful to address or even meaningful to address, but, of course, any account of fruitfulness or meaningfulness is likely to raise questions about its own fruitfulness or meaningfulness etc. Philosophy's temptation to "go global," to come up with universal theories or accounts, has been a stimulus for attack and retreat down the ages. Comprehensive theories like Popper's account of rationality either apply to themselves or do not; neither alternative is happy. The logical positivist verifiability principle, for instance, was charged early and often with being unverifiable.

(11) Comprehensive theory making has, however, not been limited to philosophy. Logicians and mathematicians have tried their hands at comprehensive theories of truth, number and set. Not surprisingly, paradox has been a problem. Certainly Bertand Russell's discussion of these paradoxes in the introduction to Principia Mathematica has been a locus classicus for a certain kind of approach. Russell's idea was that we get into difficulty when we fail to distinguish context provided by levels of

language. A word like "true" is systematically ambiguous in the sense that it appears on different logical and linguistic levels, yet gives the appearance of being univocal. This is, of course, Russell's famous type strategy, theory of type strategy or stratification strategy. We especially get into trouble when we attempt to transcend relativity to level and try to speak about all levels at once. There is, however, no level available for such talk so we vacillate between paradox and nonsense.

(12) There is something right, even natural, about the type strategy; yet there is something wrong also. For one thing, we do not always get into difficulty by talking about all levels at once. There seems to be no problem with sentences like "All English sentences begin with some letter of the alphabet". So type restrictions do not always appear to be necessary. Nor are they sufficient because there is more to context sensitivity than level relativity. Disambiguation may have nothing to do with levels at all in any obvious sense. (Distinguishing performative from descriptive aspects of words like "know".) We should not, however, underestimate the fruitfulness of the stratification approach. F. Waisman's paper "Linguistic Strata"[3] is a fine example of the potential flexibility of the instrument. Waisman's approach lies somewhere between the formal approaches to language of Russell and Tarski and the informal approaches of Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin.

(13) One problem that must be faced, however, is the self-reference problem for type theories themselves. They are supposed to cure us from the ills of universal theories but they are themselves universal. If relativity to type is necessary, then how can we have a type theory about all types? Is type theory not hoisted with its own petard, and thus isn't the present type-like attempt to deal with rationality and the *tu quoque* argument (Bartley's term) doomed to failure through self-refutation? Paul Weiss in 1928 argued this point against Russell's theory of types.[4] Frederick Fitch tackled the same problem eighteen years later.[5] Fitch thinks the type approach can be salvaged but at a price. Logic, at least classical logic, must be tampered with. We must ultimately give up the law of excluded middle. This is, of course, one way out of the Liar Paradox also. The liar sentence does not have to be either true or false. But appearances to the contrary, the present type-like approach does not have to deal with these problems. It is not itself an attempt to provide a universal theory of language. It is a partial account of that part of our language which deals with rationality and the principles of rationality. It does not deal with all possible talk about rationality but only actual or feasible (admittedly vague notions) features of such talk and language use. Infinite regress problems do not arise because we just do not ever find ourselves very high up in the type hierarchy. We could, (philosophical-logical could), but we don't. At these higher levels there are not even itches that are felt, so

the problem of whether to scratch doesn't arise (What about the apparently universal principle of the context relativity of language use and meaning? Is this not itself a universal theory? This kind of talk is difficult to avoid but the question is how seriously to take it. It is more of a rule of thumb than a theoretical principle. But this is only the beginning of an adequate response.)

(14) We have appealed to the notion of an improved language to deal with the *tu quoque.* The key idea was that of linguistic levels. These levels may be looked at as mirroring certain contexts of communication and language use. All communication is always at a certain level, it is always within a certain context. People who take the *tu quoque* seriously are simply guilty of taking things out of context.[6]

1. The literature on this issue is already voluminous. The reader is especially invited to compare the line of argument taken in the present paper with the (at points) parallel, but far more elaborate argument of John F. Post in "Paradox in Critical Rationalism and Related Theories" (*Philosophical Forum.* 1971) esp. pp. 51-52 and 54. I thank Joseph Agassi for calling Post's paper to my attention. I had not read the Post paper until after the present paper was written. Post and I come to very different conclusions.

2. For some details in connection with the construction of such a language, see Paul Lorenzen, "Methodical Thinking," *Ratio,* 1967. Unlike the constructions of logical positivists, Lorenzen's construction includes semantic or material rules as well as syntactical rules. Of course, the problems with explicating notions like 'semantic rule' are notorious. The present modest undertaking leaves these questions aside.

3. *Logic and Language,* 2nd series pp. 226-247.

4. "The Theory of Types" *Mind* 37.

5. "Self-Reference in Philosophy" *Mind* 55 1946.

6. I would like to thank an anonymous referee of this journal for some helpful suggestions.