

Toward a Holistic Moral Rationality: Questions in Response to Darcia Narvaez’s “Moral Rationality”

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ABSTRACT Key Words: Darcia Narvaez, Michael Polanyi, Aristotle, Albert Borgmann, Matt Crawford, virtue, virtues, practical wisdom, moral rationality, natural.

This brief essay summarizes Darcia Narvaez’s “Moral Rationality” and raises five questions for further reflection: Should we be wary of the erosion of the multiplicity of virtues in the ancient world to the modern discourse of virtue? How natural are the virtues? Upon what basis can we build a defensible account of human flourishing? Does the West have virtues that are worth preserving? What does “real” social life mean concretely?

I. Introduction

Like Gus Breyspraak, I begin by expressing my thanks to Darcia Narvaez, both for taking the time out of her prodigious commitments to prepare an original essay for us and for her willingness, even courage, to make a presentation at the Polanyi Society annual meeting; I know that it can be intimidating to speak about Polanyi to people who know his work by chapter and verse—in fact, I still feel like a neophyte most of time. I am also grateful for the opportunity to continue a conversation that we have pursued now and then over the past couple of years. Since discovering her work when I was on sabbatical in 2008, I have wanted to get friends and colleagues in a room where we could talk about her work and its implications for our own. This is now the second time I have been able to do so (the first was a conference at Mercer University last year) and I am excited about what can emerge from our discussions this morning.

The paper that Narvaez has prepared for us exhibits many of the qualities that I value in her work. As is true of most of that work, she draws from multiple disciplines to make her case; in this paper, that means primarily the natural sciences, the social sciences, and philosophy. Moreover, she does so with a sensitivity to what is needed for authentic human flourishing. My response proceeds then in two parts: a synopsis of the paper and an exposition of five points for our consideration.

II. A Synopsis of “Moral Rationality”

Narvaez begins her paper with a lucid and succinct account of the modern view of rationality as objective, detached, and focused on quantification, what she later calls a third-person construal of rationality. Along the way, she suggests that this view persists for two reasons: the biological fact that left and right brain hemispheres process information differently and the cultural proclivities of the modern west to prefer one to the other (or the whole; p. 5). Nevertheless, she recognizes that the modern view of rationality has its problems, most especially its failure to recognize the way that prior experience shapes perception, its naïveté about the relationship between reason and emotion given that much of the same neurological systems underlie these two capacities, and its superficiality (pp. 2-4).

In Polanyi and Macmurray, she finds people who suggest somewhat different but complementary alternatives to the modern view. She lauds Polanyi's emphasis on how knowledge is personal, experiential and perspectival, as well as Macmurray's emphasis on the kind of knowledge that emotions can provide, i.e., knowledge "of" rather than knowledge "about" (p. 4). She draws from both people to supplement her account of how rationality develops out of biological drives, bodily states, emotions, and early experiences such as parental care and interactions with the environment. The result is a rationality that, at its best, combines emotion and reason, as it did naturally under the conditions in which our ancestors evolved (p. 8). Authentic rationality therefore combines both "first-person" involvement with a "second-person" open-mindedness that is willing to meet the other on the other's own terms (pp. 9-10).¹

Narvaez next applies this model of a true or authentic (one might say holistic) rationality to the special case of moral understanding or virtue. Like rationality at its best, moral understanding is primarily tacit and learned from experience—especially negative experiences (pp. 11-12).² Like holistic rationality, moral understanding developed naturally in the ancestral environment and is threatened by the individualistic, emotionally-stunted west that turns morality into rote recitation or memorization that in turn fosters an ethic of security and perhaps even promotes moral inversion (pp. 13-14). Her solution for combating these failures of modern western life is to "get real," i.e., get engaged in life first hand, "close-up and personal," so to speak, rather than at a distance.

III. Five Points for Further Consideration

So then, what shall we make of this call to engage the world as agents who both think and care deeply? After all, this is a call to which I am sympathetic, as I suspect is true of all of who are reading this issue. Realizing that one can only do so much in a brief paper, I now offer five points for further reflection and conversation. The first three points seek to initiate a conversation between present and past (specifically with Aristotle), whereas the latter two ask Narvaez to expand on some of her key points.

First, I would like us to think some more about her treatment of virtue as moral understanding, language that strikes me as a rather modern view of virtue. As Alasdair MacIntyre and Thomas Spragens have noted, one of the things that modern moral philosophy has done is to erode the rich account of the plurality of virtues found among the ancient Greeks in favor of a monolithic, one-dimensional, view of moral virtue that emphasizes calculative reason.³ To be sure, at one level, Narvaez sounds much like the ancients (especially Aristotle), such as when she says that virtue is about "taking the right action at the right time in the right way" (cf. Aristotle's discussion of anger) or, that the development of virtue requires a supportive environment (the ancestral environment for Narvaez, a healthy polis for Aristotle) or "moral virtue is about living well" (cf. Aristotle's *eudaimonia*). On the other hand, I worry that this equation of virtue with understanding risks undermining her larger point about the holistic nature of our cognitive capacities and lends itself to reinforcing the view of moral reason as calculative and dispassionate. Aristotle avoids that problem by describing *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as the virtue that bridges or connects the moral and intellectual, the passionate and the dispassionate. In short, I wonder if we don't need something like Aristotle's more richly-textured account of the virtues (plural) in order to avoid the problems of modernity's emaciated understanding of moral reason.

My second point continues this conversation with Aristotle, for I would like to hear more about natural virtue. Again I wonder if this is a place where the ancients did better than we moderns. For Aristotle, there was nothing natural about the virtues, apart from the fact that human beings naturally seem to need them.⁴

The virtues, for Aristotle, function as a second nature that guides or channels our multiple capacities towards flourishing. Whereas for Aristotle what is natural seems to need direction, Narvaez uses “natural” as a term of approval for what is not artificial, adopted, or cultural. At this point, three related questions emerge for me. I wonder, first, if we can so easily distinguish the natural from the artificial. For example, human beings “naturally” seem to have propensities to develop the artificial (such as tools or even cultures). I wonder, secondly, if we can so easily label the natural “good” and the artificial “bad.” For example, if culture is what guides human capacities to fulfillment, in what sense is it “bad?” I wonder, thirdly, if nature is so monolithically good. For example, human beings “naturally” come wired with capacities for both aggressive behaviors and cooperative behaviors. Are they both good, or is the former good and the latter bad? On what basis do we make these judgments? In short, I would like to hear more about how we might tease apart what is natural from what is artificial, as well as what can serve as the basis upon which we make judgments of good and bad.

My third point is again rooted in Aristotle (and this will be my last, I promise). Again, Narvaez sounds like Aristotle when she talks about living well. As she develops her point, we can infer from the essay that a human life well lived is a life lived in harmonious relationship with others: we do not discriminate, we do not mistreat, we do not suppress emotions, etc. Instead we live in mutually supportive communities that foster individual growth. I am happy to affirm this broad sketch of human flourishing, but would like to hear more about what informs her normative vision, i.e., the convictions and commitments that guide her to affirm this vision of a peaceable kingdom. Is it just the ancestral environment or is there more to it?

My fourth point has to do with Narvaez’s treatment of western society. Polanyi certainly was critical of some facets of western life, but was not so seemingly pessimistic. While many of the evils Narvaez attributes to the west are fair enough (at least generally speaking), they do not tell the whole story. For example, I am not convinced that Abrahamic religions are inherently violent towards children. Whereas the evidence about the practice of child sacrifice in ancient Judaism is mixed, it is clear that early Christians remembered that Jesus valued children, as displayed by the episode in which he chastises the disciples for turning away the children, whom he then blesses.⁵ In short, our assessment of the west needs further refinement and so I ask, are there any virtues of the west that we need to preserve?

That point leads to my final question, which emerges from the treatment of the ancestral setting as good and the modern west as bad: how do we recover the best of the past? Narvaez suggests the answer when she calls us to engage in “real” social life. I am not sure what that means, however, and so would like to see some flesh put on those bones. I find her language reminiscent of arguments set out by Albert Borgmann and Matt Crawford, both of whom worry about contemporary tendencies to substitute a virtual world for a robust, real world. Borgmann makes his point by contrasting the rich texture of urban street life with a suburban supermarket. On the street, he says, “We smell the bread baking; we see the produce being trucked in. In a supermarket, to the contrary, all underlying distinctions and connections are consolidated and concealed. We are left with a superficial display of commodities.”⁶ Crawford echoes Borgmann when he compares being part of a crew with being part of a “team,” a term that now occurs ubiquitously in contemporary organizational life. On a construction crew, Crawford argues, “face-to-face actions are still the norm, you are responsible for your own work, and clear standards provide the basis for solidarity of the crew, as opposed to the manipulative social relations of the office ‘team.’”⁷ To make the point more bluntly, Crawford observes, “where no appeal to a carpenter’s level is possible, sensitivity training becomes necessary.”⁸ For him, real social life requires face-to-face engagement with others that is responsive to shared standards of success that lie outside the self

and are therefore more than personal preference or whim. My question then is this: Do these examples point us in the right direction for putting some flesh on the bones of the phrase “real social life?”

IV. Conclusion

When all is said and done, I want to reaffirm the value of Narvaez’s paper as an ally with Polanyi and others in the quest to provide a more holistic, human, and humane understanding of rationality in general and the moral life in particular. I am sure this work has stimulated your thought as it has mine. It has raised, for me at least, several issues for further exploration: the turn from virtues to virtue, how natural the virtues might be, the basis upon which we might build a defensible account of human flourishing, the other side of the story when it comes to western society, and what real social life means more concretely. I look forward to the ongoing conversation can take us.

Endnotes

¹Here I think of Buber’s distinction between I-It relationships and I-You. I wonder how Narvaez’s “2nd person” rationality compares to Buber’s “I-You.”

²At least she highlights the negative in this paper. Her larger body of work gives a more comprehensive account of how morality can be educated. For a summary, see my “The Emerging Comprehensive Moral Psychology of Darcia Narvaez” in *Tradition and Discovery* 27:3 (2010-2011):11-12.

³See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 233 and Thomas Spragens, *Reason and Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 14-56.

⁴Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Martin Ostwald (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 1103a, 25.

⁵Child sacrifice in ancient Judaism is a complex and contested topic. On one hand, the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19) seems to mitigate against the practice, which is expressly forbidden later in the Torah (Leviticus 20:2-5). On the other hand, one might infer from Exodus 22:29-30 that God required the sacrifice of the first born. Later, Jeremiah denies that God ever considered allowing child sacrifice (19:5-6), whereas Ezekiel claims that God did in fact require child-sacrifice in order to clearly establish who was in control (20:25-26). For Jesus and the children, see Matthew 19:13-15 or its parallels in Mark 10:13-16 and Luke 18:15-17.

⁶Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 131.

⁷Matthew B. Crawford, *Shopcraft as Soulcraft: an Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 199

⁸Crawford, 157.