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Cover Letter

“Faith Versus Reason: A Discourse Analysis”

By Eric Hengstebeck

The text has been formatted in accordance with the requirements of the Rollins Undergraduate Research Journal. A few sentences have been modified to help clarify the argument, but no significant content has been added or removed from the original submission.

Faith Versus Reason: A Discourse Analysis

Below is an analysis of the text “God Is Not a Moderate,” a debate between Sam Harris and Andrew Sullivan. My method for analyzing this text involves the perspectives of narrative theory and framing, as found in Walter Fisher’s “Narration as a Paradigm of Human Communication” and Robert Entman’s “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” respectively. By viewing the debate through these two perspectives, we can see the way Harris builds his moral frame on the foundation of epistemological assumptions, and that Sullivan does not effectively challenge those assumptions. Consequently, Sullivan cannot offer a coherent alternative moral frame.

After analyzing their debate, I will consider the benefits of adopting narrative rationality for continuing the conversation on more reasonable grounds. This move, I want to show, forces Harris’ argument to fall back on its moral frame, where it is open to the realm of public moral argument. Thus, in the debate between New Atheism and religious pluralism, Fisher’s narrative rationality and Entman’s framing make it possible to articulate alternative and coherent ways of situating reason and the good. What follows is a brief introduction to the two theories that inform the analysis.

Narrative Theory

In his model of the narrative paradigm, Fisher extends what he calls narrative rationality to “*all* persons not mentally disabled” (1989, p. 67), who are capable of assessing good reasons, “those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical” (1989, p. 75). Fisher calls the criteria by which all narrative beings are capable of judging good reasons, offered as warrants for stories told for and about them, narrative probability and narrative fidelity (these are similar to dramatic probability and verisimilitude) (1989, p. 64-65). By introducing narrative rationality, Fisher explicates a form of rationality with a necessary egalitarian bias, for the purpose of rescuing public moral argument from expert domination.

For the purpose of this analysis, it is important to understand the way narrative rationality rejects the primacy of what Fisher calls the rational-world paradigm. Fisher associates the rational-world paradigm with an epistemological understanding of rationality, which holds that *being rational* must be learned and is predicated on “self-evident propositions, demonstrations, and proofs” (1989, p. 60) that support arguments with “clear-cut inferential or implicative structures” (1989, p. 59). In the debate between Harris and Sullivan, I will rely on Fisher’s descriptions of these two paradigms to examine the way their debate is framed in terms of epistemological concepts of rationality.

Framing

According to Entman,

Framing essentially involves *selection* and *salience*. To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described (1993, p. 52).

Selection refers to the fact that any form of coherent human communication highlights certain aspects of the situation communicated about and not others (1993, p. 53). *Salience* refers to the way highlighted aspects of situations are used in communication, such as their placement or frequency, and situated with reference to culturally significant symbols (1993, p. 53). The frame of a text or argument can be understood in Entman's sense by asking how the selection of certain aspects of a situation to communicate about and give salience to involves defining a problem as a problem, explaining the cause of the problem, judging causal agents of the problem, and recommending a solution to the problem (1993, p. 52). Though not all forms of communication are intentionally framed, every form of communication at least implicitly involves selection, salience, problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and specific solutions. Using these criteria, I will examine the dominant moral frame in the debate between Harris and Sullivan.

Analysis

New Atheism has become a topic of media focus recently. Vocal proponents of the movement have made headlines with polemical articles, controversial bestselling books, and confrontational debates. The influence of New Atheism on public consciousness was reflected by President Barack Obama's inauguration address. As Daniel Rourke points out, Obama explicitly included "non-believers" as part of the "strength" of "our patchwork heritage" (2009).

Although Obama's inclusiveness is laudable, Madeleine Bunting points out that there is growing concern among academics—journalists, philosophers, and historians like A. N. Wilson, John Gray, and Karen Armstrong, respectively—over the rapid erosion of faith in England, where the New Atheist campaign seems to be enjoying more success than in the U.S. (2009). In Bunting's article, Gray argues that, in the midst of a global financial crisis and increasing social fragmentation, New Atheist arguments can be particularly troublesome because they sideline the fact that all human thinking and sociality relies on myth in the form of narrative (2009). Thus, New Atheists misconstrue our epistemological situation by suggesting narrative can be replaced by the clear light of reason and truth. In fact in Bunting's article Gray claims that New Atheists are only offering a new moral myth that may be "cruder, less tested, and less instructive" (2009). As a result, scholars who detect this epistemological blindness in New Atheist

arguments are often “simply not interested in the debate,” according to Bunting, and frequently decline public opportunities to speak alongside proponents of what they see as a crude ideology (2009). Yet intellectual moderates who take up the challenge in the name of religious pluralism often fail to successfully question the basic epistemological and moral frame of New Atheism, offering no explicit alternative for people who value strong arguments but find religious myths incompatible with reason.

A clear example of this situation can be seen in a recent online debate between Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith*, and Andrew Sullivan, author of *The Conservative Soul*. During the course of their debate, Sullivan attempts to resist Harris’ moral judgments while remaining within Harris’ epistemological world picture. Hence, Sullivan has to cede a logical victory to Harris in the end.

Harris states his epistemological assumptions and spells out his basic moral frame in reverse order throughout the debate. Consequently, we can find a clear indication of Harris’ epistemological commitments in this excerpt from the middle of the text:

For those interested in the origins of the universe, there is the real science of cosmology. For those who want to know about the evolution of life on this planet, biology, chemistry and their subspecialties offer real nourishment. (Knowledge in most scientific domains is now doubling about every five years. How fast is it growing in religion?) And if ethics and spirituality are what concern you, there are now scientists making serious efforts to understand these features of our experience—both by studying the brain function of advanced contemplatives and by practicing meditation and other (non-faith-based) spiritual disciplines themselves. Even when it comes to compassion and self-transcendence, there is new wine (slowly) being poured. Why not catch it with a clean glass? (2007)

Harris places the responsibility for telling the truth about who, how, and where we are as a society squarely in the domain of expert technical knowledge, treating the meaning of human life the same as any other entity science can study: “As I wrote in *The End of Faith*, whatever is true about us, spiritually and ethically, must be discoverable now” (2007). With Harris’ epistemological view in mind, we are ready to go back to the beginning of the debate to see how he builds his moral frame.

Harris clearly states his position in his opening remarks:

I think you and I agree that there is a problem with religious fundamentalism.... We are both especially concerned about Islam at this moment--because so many Muslims appear to be "fundamentalists" and because some of the fundamentals of Islam

pose special liabilities in a world overflowing with destructive technology.... Where I think we disagree is on the nature of faith itself. I think that faith is, in principle, in conflict with reason (and, therefore, that religion is necessarily in conflict with science), while you do not. Given my view of faith, I think that religious "moderation" is basically an elaborate exercise in self-deception, while you seem to think it is a legitimate and intellectually defensible alternative to fundamentalism (2007).

While the blending of fundamentalism with technology led him take up the pen for atheism, Harris regards all religion as problematic. In fact, Harris makes it clear later in the debate that religious moderates are his primary target for moral condemnation, the enabling agents who provide shelter for fundamentalist discourse and prevent intelligent discussion about spirituality:

I do not consider religious moderates to be "mere enablers of fundamentalist intolerance." They are worse. My biggest criticism of religious moderation ... is that it represents precisely the sort of thinking that will prevent a fully reasonable and nondenominational spirituality from ever emerging in our world (2007).

According to Harris, moderates, who attempt to accommodate science and religion, are logically inconsistent and, therefore, more irrational than fundamentalists: "It is true that [moderates] have taught me to appreciate the candor and the one-note coherence of religious fanatics" (2007). Harris summarizes his vision of the ideal development of individual moral autonomy in the following way:

I'm asking you to imagine a world in which children are taught to investigate reality for themselves, not in conformity to the religious dogmatism of their parents, but by the lights of truly honest, fearless inquiry. Imagine a discourse about ethics and mystical experience that is as contingency-free as the discourse of science already is. Science really does transcend the vagaries of culture (2007).

From these remarks, Harris' positive value judgments take shape: moral maturity requires stepping outside cultural contingencies to take up the unbiased view of a disinterested, technically trained, scientific observer. Thus, Harris' moral frame and epistemological assumptions are intertwined.

We can show their connection by reconstructing Harris' frame in four steps. (1) He defines the problem: Religious moderates cloud the arena of public debate over spirituality, shielding dangerous fundamentalists from criticism and ridicule by protecting religion and other outdated remnants of cultural contingency in general. (2) He explains the cause of the problem: Religion and

other remnants of cultural contingency are in direct conflict with reason, and otherwise intelligent moderates, whose reason has been deluded by religion, are unwittingly hampering the advance of science. (3) He makes moral judgments: Reason, which includes science and rationality, is good, and faith/tradition, which includes religion and irrationality, is bad. While all religious believers are unreasonable, moderates are the most irrational because they are logically inconsistent and (self)deceiving. (4) He suggests remedies: The solution to all challenges posed by the irrational remnants of culture is to step outside of cultural biases by adopting the worldview of science, to become detached, rational experts.

Harris' epistemological picture can be described using Fisher's rational-world paradigm, which is "based," in Fisher's words, "on the assumption that some people are qualified to be rational and others are not" (1989, p. 67). By emphasizing this definition of rationality, Harris challenges Sullivan to articulate a defense of faith and cultural contingency that steers between the Charybdis of morally indefensible irrationality and the Scylla of morally defensible atheism.

In his response, Sullivan primarily attempts to navigate Harris' obstacle course by justifying the possibility of the supra-rational, or a positive sense of the non-rational:

But just because ... Truth may be beyond our human understanding does not mean it is therefore in a cosmic sense unreasonable. As John's Gospel proclaims, in the beginning was the Word — logos — and it is reasonable. At some point faith has to abandon reason for mystery — but that does not mean — and need never mean - abandoning reason altogether (2007).

Rather than questioning Harris' epistemological picture and presenting an alternative moral frame, Sullivan attempts to supplement Harris' frame with a third category of *preposterous* reason that makes no sense within the rational-world paradigm.

For me, the radical truth of my faith is therefore not that God exists, but that God is love (a far, far less likely proposition). On its face, this is a preposterous claim, and in my defense, I have never really argued in this dialogue that you should not find it preposterous. It can be reasoned about, but its truth itself is not reasonable or reachable through reason alone. But I believe it to be true--not as a fable or as a comfort or as a culture. As truth. And one reason I am grateful for this discussion is that you take this truth claim seriously on its own terms (2007).

By not questioning Harris' presuppositions about the internal connections among reason, epistemology, and the good, Sullivan fails to escape Harris' definition of faith and cultural contingency as misguided and irrational. In other words,

accepting Harris' epistemological world picture makes it practically impossible for Sullivan to avoid Harris' moral categories. Sullivan agrees with Harris that rationality is good and irrationality is bad. However, according to Harris' epistemological definition of rationality, Sullivan's faith is bad. To avoid the morally negative category of irrationality established by Harris' frame, Sullivan would have to first deconstruct Harris' epistemological definition of rationality and then offer a more inclusive understanding of rationality where his faith could be both non-epistemologically founded and good.

In his concluding remarks, Harris is happy to point out the snare Sullivan reluctantly stepped into:

You acknowledge the absurdity of faith, only to treat this acknowledgment as a demonstration of faith's underlying credibility.... You want to have things both ways: your faith is reasonable but not in the least bound by reason; it is a matter of utter certainty, yet leavened by humility and doubt; you are still searching for the truth, but your belief in God is immune to any conceivable challenge from the world of evidence. I trust you will ascribe these antinomies to the paradox of faith; but, to my eye, they remain mere contradictions, dressed up in velvet (2007).

By accepting the rules of the rational-world paradigm, Sullivan was unable to resist this conclusion. Sullivan could only suggest there may be more to life than logic, ceding a logical victory to Harris.

Conclusion

Using Fisher's narrative paradigm to undermine Harris' epistemological ground, I will offer a brief sketch of how to open this debate up for public moral argument and alternative moral frames.

To illustrate the difference between the rational-world paradigm and the narrative paradigm, and to show why the rational-paradigm is insufficient, Fisher quotes Alasdair MacIntyre: "To call an argument fallacious is always at once to describe and to evaluate it" (1989, p. 66). Fisher concludes, "Traditional rationality is, therefore, a normative construct. Narrative rationality is, on the other hand, descriptive; it offers an account, an understanding, of any instance of human choice and action, including science" (1989, p. 66). Thus narrative rationality is more inclusive. In addition, epistemology loses traction at the level of understanding, for no amount of rational discoveries can ever add up to the meaningful context of interpretation necessary to make sense of those discoveries. Understanding (narrative rationality) can include epistemology but not vice versa. This insight denies science the possibility of ever proclaiming what a good life entails for everyone. Thus, Sullivan could have responded to Harris' by saying, Your moral picture is upside down: epistemology does not make an understanding of ourselves and the world possible but the reverse. And an understanding of the

good in narrative terms is always already the condition for the possibility of an explanation of the true and the right.

The claim that science offers the best way to think about morality is not secured by deductive reasoning but offered as a morally appealing story. Heroism and other positive values are associated with honestly facing the facts of life—made all the more admirable when one is understood as staring unflinchingly into a meaningless void, defiantly giving sense to one's life. It is not because this story has all the facts right that it is appealing but because it describes itself as brave enough to admit difficult facts. Thus the New Atheist story is appealing because, according to the criteria of narrative probability and fidelity, it fits better with a particular, contingent human understanding of the good life. Charles Taylor makes a similar argument in *A Secular Age*, where he cogently argues that exclusive humanist stories are admirable but limited because they almost inevitably end in triumphal individualism (2007, p. 702-703).

Thus, there is nothing epistemologically compelling about Harris' moral frame and, as a moral story, it is vulnerable. The idea of detached, rational control over the contingencies of culture and a meaningless universe all too easily lend themselves to callous, atomistic individualism and the erosion of reciprocity and community in public life. This is at least one way to begin public moral argument, with the help of narrative rationality, over what the relationship between religion, reason, and the good should be.

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