Towards a Topological Concept of Rationality

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We take up a ubiquitous yet inexhaustible theme — the essence and situatedness of rationality. The concept, as I would like to suggest, is one that is somehow simultaneously noumenal and mundane, a priori and dynamic. How might we begin to conceptualize such an entity? Let me suggest some possible directions.

We begin, it may be a surprise to some, by evoking the mystery of a basic tenet of Christian theology: the Dogma of the Incarnation. We do this not to turn this commentary into a theological treatment, which it hardly is, but rather to borrow conceptual tools with which we might redirect our approach to the problem of rationality. At any rate, this theology begins with the Divine as undifferentiated, essential, and immanent. Humans recognized God through allegory: as a burning bush, a wall of fire, the whispering wind, or through an intermediary (the prophets, Melchizedek). The Mystery of the Incarnation, however, which will prove valuable to our atheological treatment of rationality, posits that God is made manifest, and in fact, is made immediately accessible to humans through Christ, Who is God incarnate. Christ is then understood as the Logos, the Word, Who is accessible to human understanding and communication — the Divine making Self knowable. But Christ is not independent of the Divine but, rather, is the Divine made known to humankind. Christ is God made accessible to human understanding, and here it helps us to enlarge our understanding of logos to include not just the communicative but the sensible and comprehensible as well. This is not equal to the diremption of the Divine (wherein, presumably, God would diverge into three personas and be manifested in their dialectic), but to the mystery of the undifferentiated totality that is Truth. Literally, God has spoken in terms that even humans can hear but not
exhaust. It is this mystery after which we model our conceptual approach to rationality.

Rationality, writ large, is none other than truth rendered on a human dimension. As an apology to theologists, this essay is not even remotely a treatment or commentary on the mystery of the incarnation or other dogma. Rather, this article begins with this profound mystery, and learns from this a powerful mode of conceptualization that may offer hope in our struggle to capture the essence of rationality.

So, we begin with the immanence of the rational. While we ostensibly hear, in this, the murmurings of a grand narrative, yet, it is not at all narrative, because the immanent is not something that can be communicated, not interpreted, much less laid claim to by any particular discourse. What is the essence of the immanent? Only that it is un-nameable, and this is an ancient truth. Here I wish to make a distinction between the immanent, which is immediate, situated, and essential, and the transcendental.

Does the immanent and universal manifest itself through the particular? Though this is one way of expressing this, I do not believe this to be accurate. Rather, we approach the universal through the contextual, and, applying our sensible and comprehensible faculties to it, come away with topologies of understanding. This being the case, we cannot distinguish whether the plane is a projection of the surface onto our plane of understanding, or whether the plane is our understanding projected onto the surface and returning to its sender. Essentially, we begin and end with the un-nameable.

But this is an important assertion. If true, this is the reason why communicative processes cannot resolve different narratives into a meta-narrative: these topologies are non-reducible into another, and there exists no plane onto which all project, which is not itself a particular plane of the entire topology.

For want of a better description, I have begun to speak of rationality as topological, where universalist (or particularist) norms of rationality are dimensionalities of a higher-ordered, undifferentiated rationality. This is akin to the notion that even an infinite-dimensioned surface will have a projection in three-dimensional space, and the latter a projection onto a plane. Some questions arise. Can we, by observation of a multitude of projections
onto subspaces, piece together an understanding of the entire topology? No, we can only construct more complete descriptions, but cannot completely reverse the reduction to lower-ordered spaces no more than, by inspection of the tail, can we reconstruct the entire elephant. Need we reconstruct the entire topology? In this matter, I think we do not, if what we aspire to is a reconciliation of the particular projections and an understanding of how these all come together in the planes and hyper-planes of particular understandings. This is not to be understood as diremption, nor hermeneutic, nor Descarte's wax nor Rorty's mind-stuff. Perhaps we can better describe it by juxtaposing it against other models of rationality.

The model of communicative rationality posits an agonistic process by which claims are made and weighed and, ultimately, a state of consensus or, at least, mutual understanding is reached. The model of paralogy posits an agonistic process, too, but one that is aimed not at understanding but dissent, not consensus but dissension. In the one case, the hope is for resolution of divergent claims, perhaps into a new construction or a meta-narrative that is able to obtain assent from the claims-makers. In the other case, what we have is a commitment to dissension. In neither case is it possible to locate resolution a priori, whether or not an agonistic process attains this.

The topological field of rationality being suggested assumes resolution a priori. It is one of not even mutual understanding but, at the most, merely mutual understanding of mutual understanding. Take the following example.

(1) "Justice requires universal equality of treatment."
(2) "Justice requires fairness, which means proportionate treatment, wherein benefit is proportional to desert."

Here we have two statements, both cast as universals and seemingly at odds. Of the different modes by which we can attempt a resolution of this divergence, we can name a few.

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First, we can abstract and, so doing, construct a statement that characterizes both of the former: "Justice requires fair treatment." Another way is to aggregate: "Justice requires fair and equal treatment." Yet another way is to seek a meta-statement that subsumes both: "Justice requires universal application of the fair mode of treatment." Yet another way is to not seek synthesis, but to insist on situatedness: "Justice, in some contexts, demands equal treatment, and in other contexts, proportional treatment."

However, all these attempts at resolution give an inaccurate description of the entire field of justice. Is the latter then simply to remain as an un-nameable universal, as an inscrutable dictum that guides our comings and goings as if something akin to the habitus? I believe that, ultimately, the universal may essentially remain as the un-nameable, that is, that concept that cannot be captured in communicative terms, but that we can attempt to arrive at thick descriptions, however incomplete, of the native concept.

Justice is itself a universal, and in each person, we find a moral compass that seeks out both equality and fairness. It is possible that the same person act by one rule one time and by the second rule another, without necessarily positing a conflict between the two nor a need to pose the decision towards an action as a choice between alternatives. Rather, we can instead understand each rule as necessarily belonging together in a consistent, seamless concept and actuation of justice. It is this universal need for both equality and fairness that operates in each person and produces, from person to person, actions and claims that traverse the surface that encompasses, subsumes, and extends beyond these rules."

First, such an understanding does not presuppose an agonistic process, whether as in communicative rationality or in the model of paralogy. Neither does it resolve into a single precept, but rather maintains the integrity of each statement. Rather, the communicative process should be used to discuss better characterizations of the concept, rather than a competition of ideas, as if any one statement could supplant any other.

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Towards a Topological Concept of Rationality

This speaks to the human condition and, moreover, our intuition which does lead us to conceive of universals. Suffering and hope are universal conditions, as are extension and temporality. The social is a universal condition. Though you will never understand what it means to be me, nor I you, we both understand what it means to be us. We both are part of community — true, the surfaces of community which we can distinguish are manifold: we are family, neighbors, citizens, and others. But this is precisely what a communicative practice is founded on — common conditions that are immediate, yet of possibly infinite dimensionality that we do not begin to exhaust. This common ground, however, is immediately accessible in a way that we do not find with evocation of some reductionistic, almost Kantian, ideal speech situation which, in its conceptualization, presupposes the very aim of a communicative practice, to begin with. Moreover, the positing of an agonistic process does not do justice to the fundamental field of understanding which makes possible agonistic processes in the first place, nor does it comprehend knowledge and rationalities that do not result from the agonistic. The communicative practice, as described by its adherents, is reduction and, in the weighing and judging of competing claims, the process strips away perspectives and understandings in a process that can be violent and totalitarian, especially for voices that do not have their grounding in the agonistic. Communicative rationality, borrowing its logic from the liberal construct of perfect competition, places itself not in the polis but in the agora. It, at best, seeks a plane on which we can all come to agreement and, worse, reduces rationality to that surface which conquers the artificial marketplace of claims-making and judgment.

This is perhaps one rationale behind the ease with which we associate rationality with decision-making, specifically, with the choice between competing alternatives and selection of one, superior course of action. There is a strong consequentialist and instrumentalist assumption behind this, of course, but more than this, it is the unmistakable pall of the agonistic. Thus, we have come to associate rationality with competition, whether in the spirit of the communicative or decision-theoretic, and in a way that does not

conserve the integrity of the field. Indeed, reduction of the topology of rationality onto the plane of choice assumes away dimensions that deal with cognition, understanding, communication, coordination, care, experience, and integration. Rather, I maintain that positing rationality as choice, or the agonistic, results from an artifice resulting from objectifications of a universe into one where existence presumes directedness, and even communication or introspection or knowledge is flattened out into the rational-purposive. And yet, no such determinate or purposive universe exists, evoking a phrase from Chuang Tzu:

"You may hide away a boat in the ravine of a hill ... No matter how suitable a place things, whether small or large, may be concealed, there is still the danger of loss. But if you hide the whole universe in the whole universe, there is no place left for it to go."5

True, the characterization of rationality as topological is itself a reduction, but one that permits infinite dimensionality. Each particular instance, each context, adds to our understanding of the whole that is in no way exhaustive. It is a rationality that does not proceed from doubt but affirmation. Each contending claim or principle or voice is, in this light, less essentially normative than positive, ripples from the noumenal source.

It is perhaps in such an undifferentiated field that we will eventually come to some, as yet un-nameable, conciliation between the liberal and communitarian traditions (and, here, we admit that a transgressive notion of autonomy undercuts the very idea that there even is a liberal tradition), even as the latter struggles to find some reasonable ground between the inescapable pervasiveness of liberal thought and its outright rejection in the communitarian’s critique.6 It is not a middle ground that we seek, then, but a common embedding in a reality that is multiplex yet coherent.

This brings us to the idea of coherence. Why would we need to presume that such exists and, indeed, why presume that there is something expansive for distinct understandings to be embedded in?

5 James, Legge (1927), The Writings of Kwang-Zze, trans. by J. Legge (London, 1927).
To begin to answer this, we ironically borrow epistemological notions from the liberal model. We encounter in society and, in fact, within each individual, distinct motivations, ethical impulses, raw feels, allegiances, reasonings, and constructs. Within each individual, these differentiated phenomena seem to mingle and diverge, perhaps to contradict in a teleological and epistemological dialectic. And yet, these diffractions do come together and cohere — this phenomenon is none other than the concept of the person.

However we construct the person, it is in her that coherence resides, as if the uncountable planes of understandings and conceptions all intersect in a finite embodied person. The concept of the person, in fact, is itself a universal and, at the same time, the situated integration of these directions, extensions, and infinitudes. This is clear, unless we are willing to doubt the integrity of personhood and the very category of person or to reduce one to the particular residual outcome of a dialectic of situated discourses, like the slag of condensate from an industrial process.

Unlike the liberal conceptualization, though whole and compact, this person-space is embedded in a field of intersecting and diverging planes of reference. This questions our understanding of what autonomy is or how it is localized. Neither is the person to be conceived of as a bundle of thoughts, feels, needs, motivations, and endowments, this latter concept hearkening more to an unassimilated assemblage sheaved together by some erstwhile bricoleur.

The person is an undifferentiated entity, extending continuously from phenomenon to phenomenon, without betraying or detracting from the integrity of self. Doubtless, some will argue the existence of the irrational, the subconscious, nature, or, interestingly, community, to question the integrity of the person, yet all these project as surfaces from the topology of its undifferentiated origin. The person is the thick description of coherence. Neither is the person an incidental node in the discursive field, since the person is its own topology. It can at least be argued, effectively, that we at least perceive and understand self as undifferentiated whole, and reject the contrary — how else would self-reflection be possible? Introspection shows that we each at least believe in the integrity of self.

Nor is the social self to be construed as emanating from the integral self. Rather, self is a topology that finds the personal self embedded in
its own multiplex field that is itself its own topology. Thus, community is not an associative phenomenon but, rather, constitutive. It is in this very property of communion in which we find ourselves universally bound — bound not purposively or even communicatively, but essentially.

Rationality, then, is neither situated in the imagined conversation nor inherent in the potential of a process of making and testing claims. If we must situate it, then let it be understood to inhere in the essence of the person who, in topological terms, integrates surfaces and subsurfaces of understanding and experience into a seamless surface of personhood and who, herself, is integrated into countless and manifold topologies that make up communities of coherent understandings. This manifold integration is the universal experience upon which we build our understandings, not intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity cannot attain any common ground which is not already inherent in the persons and communities coming together. In this sense, metanarratives are not constructed but unearthed.

The notion of the integrity of the person has some parallel with the ecstatico-horizontal unity of time. As the self is extended over time, so is the self extended across awareness and existentialities. The concept of authenticity has a place in this discussion, not so much in the sense of a resistance to one's thrown-ness, but in recognizing the pluri-potentiality inherent in the person as self and concept. Here, we do not equate person with individual. Agency can then be conceptualized as inherent in one's choice towards authenticity. This authenticity resonates out to institutions that, in varying degrees, coheres to the integrity and pluri-potentiality of the person, or does not. Can we then talk of degrees of rationality? If so, then it is in the sense of authenticity, that is, the degree to which I act according to potentiality (for care, for dimensionality, etc.). But is so-called inauthentic action not also part of the integral self? Is there still a concept of being true to one's self, or is action, simply by being mine, evidence of being true? (The latter is akin to a type of revealed rationality.) I believe that action can be inauthentic so far as it denies the pluri-potentiality of one's being and the integrity of one's manifold personhood.

This type of integrity, or rationality as I choose to call it, is not quite equivalent to an integration of value spheres (wertrationalität) since the latter speaks of a directionality towards states of being, whereas the integrity of person is being in its existentiell sense. Integration speaks to epistemology, whereas integrity is an ontological concept. Integrity also means that one does not switch from one plane of cognition to another but merely shifts in the degree of care that the one chooses to take. This is akin to taking a topological entity and representing her/him alternatively as difference, diffraction, or community.

This has sociological implications. Institutions must also aspire to or allowed the freedom to evince the topological. The issue is how integrity is manifested and realized in each person, and how each instance of personhood can be understood as a resolution of convergent planes of action, cognition, and constitution. We can speak of individuals, but personhoods are not separable. Even as we speak of I and They, there is at the same time, I-and-They. Neither is the equivalent concept to that of community, no more than we might conceive of plurality as an amorphous mass with a life of its own. As should be clear by now, a topological understanding of reason and being knows nothing "on it’s own." Universality is found in the jointness of being and is not separable from the facticity of personhood.

Consider the narrow treatment of the person as, respectively, voter in the polis, and as consumer in the agora, which the common notion of democracy has degenerated into, leaving an operational concept of the latter that is as oppressive as its categorical other, fascism. Consider the juridical extension of the liberal ideal of the person onto institutions such as rights, and the degenerate projection of the latter concept as property rights. Thus we are left with the degenerate projection of personhood onto the world in the sense of property, the parcelization of space, the commensuration of value, the atomization into plurality, and the common depiction of hegemonic processes of subjugation of freedom and community as democratization. Democracy, so operationalized, is the negative operation of a totalitarian will on the integrity of personhood. It is in this sense that we need to give up on the ideal of democracy or, at least, redeem it from its dimensionless association with the institutional. Or rather, institutions need to evolve from the integrity of personhood rather
than the present movement in the counter-direction. This requires the freedom to recreate associations, media of exchange, and cultures of interaction. This would also require an understanding of the complex manifold of the socio-personal. Education, to take one example, is not so much the linear projection of the institution onto the cognition of its object, but the intersecting and, in fact, inter-constitutive network of planes of cognition and communication that make up knowledge. The educational institution, then, is not so much the linear-organizational entity patterned after penal institutions or fordist assembly line so much as the complex of contexts including the familial, public, personal, ethical, juridical, and cognitive planes. Media, to name another, is not so simply attributed to the dimensionless, subjugated, and retrogressive institution patterned after the Delphic sham-Wizard of Oz, but is better understood as the play of understandings and meanings that make up our communicative and cognitive inter-contextual universe. In fact, the failing of present-day inquiry is the reduction of the integrity of personhood to the negative sum of the institutions that pretend to definitiveness — hence, the syllogism from observations of failed institutions to attempts to de-center the subject, when the actual task that lies before us is to enter into the subject and deepen our understanding of this inter-contextuality.

This digression leads me to a final point, and that is to suggest a critique of the false dichotomy constructed between the universal and the particular. What happens to the question of directionality, that is, as moving from universal to particular\(^8\) or particular to universal?\(^9\) Again, one must give up the notion of directionality, or one can attempt to span the gap between universality and particularity but only through hypostasy. Rather, if we must attempt a guiding principle, it is better to understand these as oscillating descriptives of the same noumeno-phenomenal entity. Is the particular merely the universal seen from a projection onto the complex manifold? When we strip away the blueness of a marble in the hope of arriving at the a priori


concept, we lose sight of the categorical nature of the concept of blueness. There exists in the entity the potential for blueness by necessity. The potential for this cognition is universal, somehow (and this needs to be worked out more carefully) inhering in both subject and object and, in fact, undoes this classical dichotomy. A topological view allows for intersubjectivity, though one not so much forged in the smithy of the agonistic, as bound to cohere in an a priori manner between subjects. This also undoes the distinction between structure and agency since a topological view recognizes no separability of planes, but allows that distinctions may appear from the negative lens of a unitary projection, as if, by viewing a manifold from one perspective, one sees only the projection of the manifold onto a plane.

To posit the one as the contra-positive of the other is to, again, flatten the universe into the determinate and directed, as of signifiers and signified. It reduces the normative to the juridical, whereas rightness inheres in the commonalities of experience and motivations and exists in various forms in various contexts, in dimensions where there is no universal or particular, but only the seamless topologies of understanding.

This being the case, rationality writ as intersubjectivity denies the facticity and phenomenal nature of subjectivity, and vice-versa. Neither is community an adequate description for a noumeno-phenomenal entity that is primarily a manifold topology of being and action. The topology coheres in and constitutes the concept of personhood, understood as the integrity of the authentic self.