

THE REVOLT AGAINST REASON

Disbelief in the power of human reason, in man's power to discern the truth, is almost invariably linked with distrust of man . . . epistemological pessimism is linked, historically, with the doctrine of human depravity, and it tends to lead to the demand for the establishment of powerful traditions and the entrenchment of a powerful authority which would save man from his folly and his wickedness.

Karl Popper, "Conjecture and Refutations"

One of the central questions of philosophy has been: "How do we know what we know?" Since no society operates in an intellectual vacuum, or without some dominating view of man's nature, the answers supplied by epistemology (the theory of knowledge) have had a profound impact on the fate of civilization.

The Virtue of Reason

The Greek philosopher Aristotle provided one solution to the problem of knowledge when he defined man as the "rational animal". The ability to reason is man's distinguishing characteristic which accounts for the knowledge (philosophy, science, mathematics and history) and the products of that knowledge (e.g. medicine, technology, the arts) possible only to man.

Traditionally, the term "reason" has included four traits of consciousness: 1) thinking which transcends immediate perception; 2) the ability to make general, abstract ideas; 3) the ability to make explicit inferences; and 4) the power of introspection, of self-consciousness. In a word, men possess a conceptual type of consciousness, which no other species shares.

Man, on this same view, is neither omniscient nor infallible. If man's conclusions about the world are to be true, they must be guided by logic, which is the method of non-contradictory identification of the material provided by the human senses. Furthermore, this theory recognizes that the employment of man's conceptual faculty is not automatic—it is volitional, which means that in any moment of his conscious life man may choose to think, to apply the rules of logic, to reason, or he may evade thought and rely upon some inner mental fog to reach his conclusions, in which case he cannot claim knowledge to be the end result.

The ramifications of this theory of man's mind can be discerned in those historical eras which embraced rationality as the cardinal human virtue—notably, the Golden Age of ancient Greece, the European Renaissance, and the Industrial Revolution. These were the ages which generated significant advances in the material well-being and freedom of mankind.

Individualism—the doctrine that each man is an end in himself—is the social concomitant of reason: If man possesses the faculty of apprehending reality, he must be free from social compulsion in order to act upon the judgment of his mind. Thus, the socio-economic system entailed by reason would recognize the natural rights of man and would be governed by voluntarism, rule by contract, and laissez-faire.

Mysticism & Skepticism

This typically Aristotelian view of man and knowledge has been attacked and vilified by two rival traditions: mysticism and skepticism. Mysticism contends that man has the power to acquire knowledge through non-sensory, non-rational means; its favored candidates for this honor have been faith, intuition, and revelation.

Skepticism, on the other hand, professes that knowledge of the real world is impossible, that man's senses are deceptive, that reason is a sham, that nothing is certain (except, presumably, the skeptics' conclusions).

Mysticism claims that reason is inferior to the "higher" forms of knowing; skepticism claims that reason is impotent. As a result, the mystic and the skeptic are unholy allies in their condemnation of reason and in their defense of feeling, whim and intuition (but while the mystic claims intuition yields true knowledge, the skeptic, having allegedly invalidated all knowledge, claims that science and superstition are on an equal footing).

Fruits of Unreason

The cultural transmission of mysticism and skepticism from the ivory tower to society at large has produced impressive results—impressive, that is, if one's yardstick is primitivism and destruction. The Dark Ages are a monument to the poverty of supernaturalism (a variant of mysticism) which claims that there is a realm of beings superior to nature—the theory which is the basis for religion), and the symbol of anti-life, anti-mind bias of irrationality.

The socio-economic corollary of irrationalism is collectivism, or holism, which maintains that the individual must be subordinated to the good of society (or the State, the race, the tribe).

The paradigm of collectivist blueprints is to be found in Plato's **Republic** which depicts the totally regimented society, the ideal garrison state. It is not coincidental that Plato, who believed in universal social engineering in order to arrest cultural change, also believed in a trans-empirical realm of changeless forms which man could come to know only through a mystical-intuition.

The revolt against reason, however, did not receive wide intellectual acceptance until the Post-Renaissance era which witnessed the solipsism of Berkeley, the skepticism of Hume, the subjectivism of Kant, and the dialectics of Hegel. The legacy of these philosophers is most pronounced in the ideological crisis of the twentieth century:

- the Marxist and Nazi doctrines of polylogism which assert that an individual's thinking is determined by his economic class or race;
- logical atomism and positivism which claim that if our knowledge is indubitable it tells us nothing of the world, and, conversely, if our knowledge is of the world it cannot attain certainty;
- pragmatism which proclaims that the truth is that which works, and if one pragmatic truth fails, try another pragmatic truth;
- behaviorism which denies the existence of consciousness, professes that all human action is thoroughly programmed by heredity or environment, and claims to see no radical difference between the behavior of rats and men;
- existentialism which, in fitting tribute to modern irrationalism, declares that "existence is absurd".

For mass consumption there is the New Left (the neo-Luddites) who, under the intellectual leadership of Herbert Marcuse, correctly correlate Aristotelian logic with science and technology, and then proceed to damn both in their call for an anti-industrial revolution.

There is "con" artist Charles Reich who disparages rational individualism and puts his faith in the "new generation" of hippies and flower children because they arrive at their conclusions by a process he describes as "just knowing".

And there is psychologist B. F. Skinner who earned the epithet "head shrinker" when he declared

that society must go "beyond freedom and dignity" into a system controlled by an elite of behavioral psychologists, thereby providing the missing link between Plato's *Republic* and Orwell's 1984.

Reason or Decay?

There is no cosmic inevitability behind current trends; man is free to go to hell in his own fashion, and if this wave of irrationalism goes on, he will. But there is a germ of truth in the pronouncements of the mystics and skeptic: Man is a brute once he relinquishes reason; his behavior is determined, once he allows his emotions and whims to play it deuces wild; his existence is absurd if he chooses to go out of his mind in search of an effortless, non-productive, non-rational mode of life.

The rebirth of the world depends on the resurrection of reason, individualism and capitalism. Mysticism and skepticism, if left to their own devices, can only achieve wholesale carnage.

RECOMMENDED READING:

For the New Intellectual, by Ayn Rand
Reason and Analysis, by Brand Blanshard
Reason and Belief, by Brand Blanshard
The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes, by Mortimer Adler

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Adopted October 1969

As Advocates of Individual Liberty We Affirm:

That every person has an inalienable right to their own life, liberty and property;

That the only proper use of force is in retaliation against those who violate human rights;

That the basic violation of human rights consists of the initiation or the threat of the initiation of force against the individual;

That all proper social organization can only be a consequence of voluntary association between individuals;

That the only economic system consistent with human prosperity and happiness is laissez-faire capitalism;

That the ideologies and instrumentalities of coercive collectivism are the basic threat to human rights and the existence of moral human societies;

And that both moral individuals and moral societies have the obligation to act in their own rational self-interest to protect themselves from those who seek to coercively control, direct and enslave them.

With the apostles of coercion increasingly predominant in the councils of man, it is the duty of all those who value their life, liberty and property to take appropriate action—intellectual and social—to preserve and extend their freedom.

We as libertarians resolve to resist all forms of involuntary collectivism and all programs and activities of government which violate our rights and attempt to take from us the ability to set our own goals and to determine our own destiny.

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