

Notes on Denigrating Reason — Bob Clarke, June 2015

Intro:

- Some say that our Western Society is over-obsessed with Reason. Compared with 'The East', 'The West' is 'over-rational', reason is its fetish. We are over-dependent on it. We allow science to rule our lives. We need a 'more human' approach to the world to solve our problems.
- But examples from recent politics show that we don't really prioritise Reason in our society at all.
- Far from being committed to defending Reason in the West, we have exhibited amazing enthusiasm, skill and zest in finding ways to denigrate it! We believe our own **Caricatures** of Reason, and so no longer have a coherent account of it!
- As a result, Reason no longer qualifies as a foundation for our moral principles — we can't take it seriously. We have lost our faith in it, which is to say that we have lost faith in *ourselves*. We are in denial about an essential human capacity.

A Coherent Concept of Reason: Autonomous Reason — *inspired* by Kant but **not** using Kantian terminology - crucially **not** an abstract philosophical Ivory-Tower concept - it's about practical living in *our* world. It entails action in *our* world.

- I'm taking my concept of Reason from ordinary every-day experience. This is Reason '**writ large**':
- **Autonomous Reason or Rationality** is our human capacity that allows us:
 - To 'give reasons' - to give an account of ourselves & our actions — to take responsibility for them.
 - To 'be reasonable' — demonstrating the moral import of Reason. e.g. to engage in Reciprocity.
 - To make informed decisions rather than rely on uninformed opinion and superstition.
 - To communicate with each other effectively.
 - To get the facts out in the open —for debate: this implies an Open vs. a Closed Society.
 - To think for others, possibly everybody, not just ourselves — to take the wider view.
 - To value education rather than training & rote learning — to learn *how* to think for ourselves.
 - To develop understanding as a project, e.g. as in science, technology, history, etc.
 - To avoid dogmatism — listen to informed opinions and respond to them. To use **self-criticism!**
- Reason thus understood 'writ large' includes within it '**Instrumental**' Reason (i.e. the finding of means to ends), which is what Hume refers to when he says '*Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions ...*'. This is **explicitly amoral**, whereas the Classical and Kantian vision is of **Autonomous 'Objective' Reason**, which has all of the above attributes, and which is explicitly moral.
- Reason is profoundly human - (animal as well!) - and **not** externally given: **not** 'God-Given' & **not** Alien.
- '**Autonomous Reason**' allows us to be morally autonomous. Here it encompasses:
 - 'Rationality', '*The Application of Human Rational Capacities*', '*The Intellect*' and '*The Enlightenment Project*'
 - ...I'm just using the word '*Reason*' because it has only two syllables.

Ways of Denigrating 'Reason' - The Case for the Prosecution!: NB. **Warning**: much of this is very poor rhetoric.

An incomplete list of the myriad ways we have found to denigrate Reason — an essential part of our psyche !!!!

- '**The Fall of Man**' & **Original Sin**: *Genesis* + St Augustine: Man's wits are addled since '**The Fall**' — follow God!
- **Scepticism**: from — 260 BC. Greek Academic Scepticism: man can know nothing. Don't try to understand the world or adopt beliefs about it, rather cultivate **ataraxia**: peace of mind - an argument associated with Pyrrho of Elis.
- In the **Early Modern Period**, **Scepticism** was used to encourage the Christian '**Leap of Faith**'. Both Roman Catholics (Montaigne in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*) and Protestants (Luther and, later, Kierkegaard) pursued this rhetoric. Don't trust your own rationality to guide your life — trust the Church or the Bible! Reason is sin! Satan's sin!! Pride!!!
- The most recent manifestation of Scepticism is **Post-Modern Relativism**: there are no criteria for discovering the truth, only opinions and narratives — especially about morality. Science is just another narrative.
- **David Hume**: His *Treatise* puts Reason in its place: '*A Slave of the Passions*' ... it's amoral — often immoral!
- **Romanticism**: '*a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature*'. **John Keats** accuses Newton of '*unweaving the rainbow*' — disenchanting the world. **William Blake**: his character *Urizen* personifies Reason — a combined Jehovah and Satan like figure — totally misguided — the *Fallen* (cf. also the Gnostic Demiurge). Blake's image of Newton as a classical hero has him sitting at the bottom of the sea! These thoughts feed into **Sense and Sensibility** arguments.
- **Divide and Rule**: Institutionalization of the rational enterprise of 'Natural Philosophy' from the mid-18th century onwards splits it into 'Science' and 'Philosophy'. An a-moralized Science is supported by governments & an expansionist capitalist economy because it gives them power, while Philosophy, which has a moral critique of that power, is rendered 'Ivory Tower' and politically impotent. Philosophers rejoice in their own impotence *to this day!!* Few (very few!) philosopher-intellectuals take a public stand against Anti-Reason and political immorality!!
- **Institutionalised Reason** evolves pathologically and turns upon itself: scientists disparage philosophy, positivism undermines morality, and supposedly 'rational' Scientism disparages all other forms of Reason.
- **Nietzsche & the Death of God**: Reason (as an emanation from God) must also be Dead! It has critically **undermined** itself and **its own foundations**. We no longer have any orientation points — no horizon — no criteria for judgement.

- **Alienating Strategies:**

Reason is '**God-Given**'. God is a paradigm of Rationality. What little we have, he has given to us by his Grace.

Reason is **dry** and **inhuman**, i.e it is '**Cold Reason**'. In *Star Trek* Mr Spock (an alien) represents Reason, Kirk is touchy-feely Humanity: **Sense vs. Sensibility**: the latter always wins in popular entertainment culture!

Terminology: e.g. in the universities we have the 'rational' faculties of science, engineering and medicine — and the rest are '**The Humanities**'! As if science, engineering and medicine are not human enterprises!

- **Feminist Critiques**: Caroline Merchant: critique of Bacon's metaphor of '*torturing Nature*' to reveal '*her*' secrets. Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*: Reason has evolved as a vehicle for Male thinking. ^ Half of humanity ignored!
- **The Dialectic of Enlightenment**: Critical Theory: Adorno/Horkheimer: The Enlightenment leads to Disaster: *The Terror* in the French Revolution ... and subsequently to *Nazism* and *The Holocaust*!
- **Positivism, Reductionism and Scientism** have been represented as the logical conclusion of Reason — not just by the anti-reason brigade, but also by the Scientific brigade! They militate against the priority of important human values!
- '**Scientific Studies**' seem to support this positivist, reductionist, scientific argument: empirical psychological studies 'show' that 'Reason' is actually a post-decision **rationalisation** (Libet & *Kant's Joke* on the Internet, Haidt).

To Summarise — Rhetorical Ploys used against Reason:

Arguments: (*Warning: these arguments are not, generally, mutually compatible - of course not! They are mostly badly founded*).

1. **Theological Alienation**: Reason is God's — *not* ours — rational autonomy is **Hubris** and **Pride** — **Pride is a Deadly Sin**
2. **Secular Alienation**: Reason is inhuman, cold, uncaring - the province of aliens, computers and robots.
3. **Romanticism** (in some guises) reinforces this approach: Reason gives us a sick view of the world. Unspiritual, uninspiring! It has disenchanting the world. It is **Reductionist**. It leads to **Scientism**: the **Hubris** of scientific intellectuals.
4. **Sense and Sensibility**: A similar argument is used to boost sensibility at the expense of sense — sensibility is far more human. e.g. Hollywood: love is what matters and Captain Kirk always proves right in the end.
5. **The Intolerance of Reason**: Reason is **exclusive**, it denies the value of our sensibility and of emotions in our lives, and it recognises no other values but its own.
6. **Incompetence**: Our rational capacities are not competent enough to give us justifiable opinions on the world.
7. **God is Dead** and Reason along with Him. Reason no longer has a credible foundation. Abandon it!
8. **Scepticism** boosts this approach, it leads to moral relativism and, especially, in our **post-modern condition**, it denies that there are criteria for judging the truth — especially moral truth: Reason can get no foothold.
9. **Ataraxia**: This leads to arguments for *ataraxia* — peace of mind — don't bother with issues that we're not competent to deal with. Make things easy for yourself — it's OK, don't bother with knowledge or belief - just lead a good life!
10. "**Slave of the Passions**": Reason exists but "*it is and ought always to be*" a slave of the passions. It has **no autonomy**, it is narrow, purely directive, and purely a **means** to an end, it cannot help us to *decide* our moral ends - Hume.
11. **Amorality: Reason has Nothing to do with Morality**. A position that one can derive from Hume's approach (opposed by Kant, of course, who shows that Reason has Everything to do with Morality).
12. **Dialectic of Enlightenment**: The Age of Reason led inevitably to *The Terror* of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment led to Nazism and *The Holocaust* in Germany.
13. **Reason is a Male Trait** and therefore inappropriate for half of humanity! Or at least (Genevieve Lloyd) it has ignored and underplayed femininity.
14. **Freedom is More Important than Reason** — Paul Feyerabend. We should say *Farewell to Reason*. After Feyerabend, this doctrine becomes a popular post-modern approach to the human condition.
15. **Reason is nothing but Post-Hoc Rationalisation**: Modern science 'shows' it to be just another superstition (like God). The brain, governed by the laws of physics, actually 'decides' what we do. 'We' & 'I' are just epiphenomena with no free will.
16. What's more, our **sub-conscious** mind/brain is **irrational** — as Freud has shown!
- 17-18: Paul Feyerabend argues that Reason is, **17, Elitist** and, **18, Imperialist!** Hubris again!
- 19 **Intellectuals are Dangerous**: Paul Johnson: they have *Crazy Ideas* and don't practice what they preach (e.g. Rousseau, Marx)!

Institutionalisation:

20. **Divide and Rule**: Philosophy & Science are widely seen as incompatible in the academy, rather than being the same rational enterprise, that of trying to understanding the world and ourselves in it! Philosophy is disparaged (esp. by philosophers!). **Rhetorical**

Methods & Sophistry used against Reason:

21. **Partial Quoting of Texts and Quoting out of Context**: '*Reason is the slave of the passions*' is a great **sound-bite put-down**, quoted out of context. Likewise people uncritically abstract only the 'bad news' about Reason from '*The Dialectic of Enlightenment*' and Libet etc. and draw conclusions from partial information. (*Not good philosophy!*).
22. **Caricaturing of Reason**: It's Alien, e.g. Mr Spock. Present it as 'cold' and 'inhuman'. Keats and Blake present Newton as misguided. Deny the autonomous breadth of Reason. State that it is *always* reductionist (when it is not), etc, etc.
23. **Reason is Dangerous!** It's given us the Bomb! It may destroy us! In Medieval times 'Reason' breached its limits of competence (Kant) — thereby actually *aiding* the authoritarian power-play of the church, aiding its pogroms, inquisitions & burnings at the stake. It gives megalomaniacs power! The Bomb! Today Scientism threatens our humanity!

Suffice it to say that virtually all of these positions are spurious: they can readily be refuted or shown to be philosophically immature. Only 23, 13 (Lloyd) & 3 (on anti-scientism) have defensible arguments.

The Answer: Identify our mistakes. See Reason as it really is - fully human — not in terms of reductionist caricatures:

- Let us go through the list again. In almost every case the anti-Reason arguments can be seen to be wrong because the premises or the dogmas or the historical contingencies they are based upon are wrong.

Counterarguments for Reason - A Sketch of the Case for the Defence (much more robust!):

The Fall, Original Sin and Religious Alienation:

- A scientific approach might be: '*The Fall*' is the myth of a long dead civilisation & so can be rejected as superstition! But there's more to it than that. Myth usually reveals moral truths: precisely that we *do* want to understand our world!
- **Feuerbach:** *The Essence of Christianity* (1841): we have **alienated** all that we admire and that is good in ourselves to God, including Reason. We must reclaim it & recognise it as *thoroughly human* — make it work for us. This is not *Hubris*!
- **St Augustine vs. Pelagius** (415-430 AD) **Pelagius** opposed Augustine's denial of human **autonomy**. The (Greek!) Bishop of Rome (the 'Pope') favoured Pelagius, but the Emperor Honorius (possibly bribed by a follower of Augustine) had Pelagius condemned for being anti-corruption. So: 'Original Sin' and the denigration of unaided human Reason became the official line of W. Christianity: to support power politics! Eastern (Orthodox) Christianity can make no sense of it!

Scepticism:

- It's good when used against dogma, but not if taken too far, when it becomes self-contradictory and demoralising.
- Most people have to make a living: *Ataraxia* is just for rich intellectual layabouts. **Francis Bacon** advised against absolutist scepticism: get on with life: '**Truth will sooner come out from error than from confusion**'.
- Post-modern moral apathy is a gift to power-mongers with an Agenda to enact immoral policies.

Hume:

- His '*Slave of the Passions*' is usually taken out of context. It's an argument against *Continental Rationalism* ("*Speculative Natural Philosophy*"). Furthermore, Hume is in at the groping beginnings of modern introspective psychology. His psychology is actually an attempt to emulate Newton's Laws in the mental realm! Physics is always a poor analogy for psychology! He has an inadequate analysis of mental affections: 'Motivations' are included in the 'Passions' along with Emotions, Dispositions & Inclinations & just about everything else! Psychology has progressed significantly since Hume's time. Hume errs in being reductionist. Autonomous Reason counters this error.
- Kant countered Hume by showing how rational thought is deeply and morally integrated in our world.

Romanticism:

- Blake etc. misunderstood Newton & his *deep spirituality* and that of many other promoters of the Scientific Revolution.
- They misunderstood the importance of Imagination and Wonder as motivations in Science, see *Unweaving the Rainbow* by Dawkins & *Moral Clarity* by Susan Neiman on misrepresentation of The Enlightenment.
- Scientists find just as much wonder in the world as did the Romantics. In ~1800, Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth worked with the scientist Humphrey Davy to promote **mutual creativity**! See Mike Jay, *The Atmosphere of Heaven*

Divide and Rule:

- Institutionalisation and the antagonism of Science and Philosophy: this is the **Great Schism** in modern Academic Reason — it has done nobody any good. They are actually the same rational enterprise: Science is (still) Natural Philosophy.
- Philips Griffiths: '*Philosophy Boils no Cabbages*' (1988). i.e. Philosophy is incompetent & achieves nothing! This provoked a reaction: the founding of the *Society of Applied Philosophy*: Philosophy has much to tell us about the world and how we should live in it. Philosophy *can & ought* to guide to our lives.
- Louis Wolpert & Lawrence Krauss claim that science can learn nothing from philosophy!! The facts are against them! **Death**

of God:

- Nietzsche was right about the profound psychological effects of our gradual loss of faith in God and the real need to rethink our moral landscape. But Reason doesn't die with God. We have misconstrued its provenance if we think it comes from God. **Reason is not Dead** — it cannot actually be alienated from humanity. What dies with God is **Absolutist Foundationalism**, *the search for Certainty in religion and philosophy*. **Certainty is not a Goal of Reason!!** It is pragmatic!
- Do away with *Certainty* - science doesn't need it or use it - it's more obsessed with **uncertainty**! Reason can use the **Hypothetico-Deductive** approach: foundations are not regarded as absolute but just empirically useful & predictive. This is very effective. **But we should make our premises (postulates) explicit and regard them as corrigible.**

Scientism:

- Scientism and Reductionism sin exactly on this point. They do not examine the premises of science, they fix them unthinkingly as dogma - in this respect they are very conservative. They adopt only the Instrumental arm of Reason and *just that* is what projects a spurious inhumanity & coldness upon Science. See the critique of Horkheimer.

Sense and Sensibility:

We are human: we feel, we live in our feelings. But we need to cultivate the right sort of feelings: e.g. morality vs. selfishness. We need criteria for 'right sort'. Even Empathy cannot work without a knowledge of the facts.

Dialectic of Enlightenment:

- *Critical Theory*: Horkheimer (at least) is not *against* Reason in the Kantian sense: i.e. autonomous, *critical* reason that examines its own premises and gives us moral perceptions. **He would like to rescue it!** The **problem** is that we prioritise the instrumental, 'subjective', part of Reason & ignore those aspects that are thoroughly Human and Moral.
- Also: Nazism and Fascism were mostly inspired by varieties of Romanticism, far less by Reason and Enlightenment.

Modern Empirical Scientific Studies:

- Jonathan Haidt, in *The Emotional Dog and its Rationalist Tail* and some followers of Libet argue that empirical psychological studies show 'Reason' is actually post-decision rationalisation! We're supposed to respond: '*Oh Dear, we always thought that conscious rationality was what directed our actions*'. The answer to this is '*No, we didn't*'. We can internalise our rational and moral responses, just as we internalise skills like riding a bike or playing the piano. We can '*develop character*'. Aristotle's *Virtue Ethics* advocated this. We can educate ourselves to act *unconsciously* morally.
- If Reason has nothing to do with making decisions, what is the point of '*drawing things to our attention*' when we have really hard problems or when things go wrong? See Heidegger's '*ready to hand*', etc.
- Besides, Libet & Haidt are only talking about *individuals* making decisions alone. **We exist in society**. We discuss our problems & decisions with friends & colleagues & have political debates, etc. This is Reason both open & conscious.

Some Valid Criticisms:

- *Instrumental Reason* is dangerous - it has given us the Bomb. But *Autonomous Reason* must counter it.
- Is (was?) Reason sexist? Yes — but we need critical thinking to get over this prejudice.
- 'Reason' is prone to prioritising only a part of itself, or, rather, **we** are prone to using only a part of our capacities: e.g. only *Instrumental Reason* in our consumer society, or reductionism & unexamined premises in Scientism. ... but these examples give **all the more reasons** why Reason should be **self-critical** and should examine and correct these biases in favour of supporting **human well-being**. If supposed 'reason' produces something we don't collectively like (e.g. coldness), it's a sure sign that something is wrong with our concept of Reason & that we should re-examine our premises.

Discussion and Conclusions:

- (1) I've been arguing only for a 'corrective': that Reason should be more widely applied in our Society - **NOT** that it ought to "take over" or be our only approach to the world. It *can* solve our problems and *can* suggest moral directions if properly applied.
- (2) But we undervalue and often discount Reason because:
 - (a) We see and attack its **partial application** to problems: usually, in the 20th & 21st Centuries, *Instrumental Reason* (in Horkheimer called '*Subjective*' Reason) is all that is allowed to us - we've been convinced that that is all there is to it!
 - (b) We *caricature* it and *attack* these same caricatures, whilst assuming that they alone are all that Reason is.
 - (c) Millennia of disparagement have had their effect. I'm not a psychologist but would like to suggest that in 'The West' it all stems from the concept of **The Fall** — a supposed Systemic Failure of Reason. Even for the most fundamentalist atheists among us, the Hegemony of *The Fall* is still active in our subconscious — under our skins, dragging us further downwards!!
- (3) Why do we disparage Reason?
 - (a) Moral and intellectual laziness — it's easier not to think and to get one's opinions from others (e.g. tabloids).
 - (b) Fear that it is elitist, or that others will disparage us if we profess to use it.
 - (c) We are often encouraged to do so by power mongers: we are easier to govern if we reject Reason. Powerful Rhetoric.
- (4) **Human Moral Aspirations have actually improved over the Ages, guided by the precepts of Autonomous Reason**. But what we need is more **Praxis**: applying our aspirations in the political and social spheres: philosophers have a role to play in this!

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