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REASON IN THE MODERN AGE

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As a discrete age in history, the modern age defines itself by its inability to solve the most challenging and basic problems facing humans. The Reformation raised challenges to the Roman Catholic claims to represent Historic Christianity. Debate failed to bring unity, and the ensuing Wars of Religion destroyed the medieval fabric of Europe. The unifying strength of authority had been lost. Illegitimate authority relying on specious arguments had been exposed. But without a method to replace it with legitimate authority, the modern age began a project of how-to-live-in skepticism.

The defining document of modernity (the Peace of Westphalia) stands in stark contrast to the defining document of the Reformation (the Westminster Confession of Faith). Where Westminster begins by affirming the light of nature to know God, Westphalia looks to pragmatic solutions that contain but do not resolve religious conflicts. This has been the characteristic of modernity to the present and explains why its major social analysts (like Weber and Durkheim) spend their time on economic and political rationality while relying on pragmatic solutions that keep the balance of skepticism about the knowledge of God and the basic problems of existence.

Modernity inherited these problems. It inherited the lack of a method for solving divisions about the knowledge of God. These are deeply worked into the nature of the Academy and Platonic mysticism on the one hand and Aristotle and his proclamations about how the heavens must work given his assumptions on the other (Aristotle 1999; Plato 2009). Simple observations about the world (like speed of falling objects) and then via telescope the planets (moons of Jupiter, phases of Venus) disprove the Aristotelian system.

What remained were logic and mathematics. At one level, modernity did these exceptionally well. Turning itself to dominion over the natural world to

reduce natural evils (toil, strife, famine, war, plague, old age, sickness, death, etc.), it produced technological advancements that sometimes decreased and sometimes increased natural evils. Having kept half of the first commandment to mankind (have dominion), modernity almost forgot its origins out of chaos.

As the defining name of modern philosophy, Descartes (2017) received the credit for defending the new science against Aristotle and the blame for all the failures of modernity. The Cartesians are a standard boogeyman for the postmodern analysts. But Descartes pointed the way to a solution that modernity needed but ignored. He pointed to the need for certainty about the self and about God. In doing this, he was more like Augustine rather than Plato or Aristotle, even getting credit for the *cogito* first stated by Augustine (2002). But what Descartes set out to do (provide a method for having certainty about first philosophy) later generations still debate and consider unresolved. And because Descartes sought to answer ‘how do we know?’ the conflict with skepticism continues. What can we know if we can’t know that our senses are accurate or that God is real? We can know if we are satisfied. Reason can perform the instrumental function of producing what satisfies. So, the modern project ended up embracing skepticism and redefining reason to fit narrow limits. This has been called the ‘invention of the modern self’.

Defining reason

‘Reason’ means ‘the laws of thought’. Reason is that by which we understand anything at all. It is sometimes called the light of the mind or the light of nature. By reason, we distinguish the essence of a being from other beings. We compare beings, and we identify contradictions. Reason aims to understand the meaning in the world and what its meaning points us towards. *Reason* in this sense is distinct from *reasoning*, and it is a certain kind of *reasoning* that the ancient, then medieval, then modern ages excelled at while neglecting more important uses of reason. The analogy to light is fitting. Just as we see with the eye, so we understand by reason. If we wanted to study the eye, we would still be using an eye to do so. When we study reason, we are using reason to do so. This reason is the most basic thing to begin our search to understand. Advances in philosophy are motivated by advances in understanding reason, and declensions are measured in the loss of reason and the advancing darkness.

Reason is directed to understanding any subject. This is true if it is used to understand the creation or if it is used to understand scripture. Forming a belief, even a belief about the inadequacy of reason requires using reason. The division between reason and faith not only is characteristic of the modern world but was also found in the medieval. What characterises modernity is the inversion of the two. Whereas the medieval theologian like Aquinas

(1981) could say that nature can only take one so far and that arguments to show that only God has existed from eternity fail, but instead faith and scripture must provide the needed content.

The collapse of authority

The Wars of Religion brought the collapse of the church as the source of law and authority for Europe. The search for the universal to support common life was directed to the natural world. Positive laws differing from nation to nation were understood in light of an 'out of the state of nature' origin story where people were free to enter into a social contract for positive law. This origin story provided the universal needed to explain the particulars. In the same way, faith was understood to be a particular against the backdrop of the universal search for meaning. Within prescribed bounds, persons were free to join a religious community in their individual search for the universal meaning.

The postmodern insight is the self-reflective nature of reason in both cases. Reason is that by which we understand either nature or faith rather than one side of the dichotomous relationship (reason vs. faith). The postmodern turns reason on itself as 'reason's study of reason'. This is a continuation of the Enlightenment and modern projects rather than its repudiation. As the Enlightenment rejected the superstitions on the basis of its fallacious understanding of causality, so too the postmodern rejects the projection of personal and particular values onto the universal. Often mistakenly charged with relativism and then rejected as leading to nihilism, the postmodern actually looks to allow for freedom in areas where knowledge is not possible while advancing the causes of the universals (justice, equality, shared environment, etc.).

Thesis

For all of its boasting about the use of reason to organise human society and move away from superstition, modernity failed to use reason to understand the most basic truths about human existence. This resulted in a culpable ignorance that is felt at all levels of the individual and social life. Existentially, the failure is felt in the loss of meaning in the pursuit of the highest good. Logically, the failure is seen in the inability to answer the most basic questions about existence, such as what has existed from eternity.

Modernity only side-stepped the problem of the Wars of Religion; it did not solve the questions that caused those wars. Those are questions about the highest authority, about what is real, about sin and redemption, and about the highest good. Ultimately, they are questions about meaning. The method is to identify assumptions and test them with reason for meaning. When the laws of thought are violated, meaning is lost. The aftermath of the horrors of modernity requires us to go back to the beginning and use reason to answer these questions. The result is meaning and unity.

First philosophy and modernity

Modernity began in the middle of the 17th century with the end of the Wars of Religion and the Peace of Westphalia, which institutionalised skepticism about religious divisions. Where debate and war had failed, common life together required setting aside religious belief as part of the common pursuit of the good. The ‘state of nature’ myth served to provide the foundation for the state in need of protection and cooperation for food and shelter. The demands of natural evils (old age, sickness, toil, famine, plague, war, death and so on) took the centre and dislodged the command to have dominion and pursue the knowledge of God.

Modern philosophy begins with Descartes (1999), who sought to disconnect philosophy from the accumulated errors of Aristotle and Plato. Simple observation showed that the philosophy of Aristotle was mistaken in its understanding of the natural world. The mysticism of the platonic philosophy had nothing to contribute to the modern challenges. What remained were mathematics and logic. The Cartesians adopted both of these. Descartes doubted everything so that he could arrive at what could not be doubted. His solution is the famous ‘I think therefore I am’. But Augustine (2002) also doubted and also stated this same truth. Aristotle began with what has come to be called the law of non-contradiction: something cannot both be and not be. Descartes did not doubt this law and his *cogito* is an application of that law. But then he asks a question that Aristotle did not struggle with. How can we trust our senses? And first philosophy is meant to explain how we can trust our senses so that we can go on to understand the world. This provided the basis for the universal that had been lost in the Wars of Religion.

Descartes looks to prove the existence of God as the greatest being who cannot deceive. This set the discourse about God in modernity. Descartes’ proof for God’s existence ends him up in a circle: we have a clear and distinct idea of God. Because God exists, we can trust our clear and distinct ideas; therefore, our clear and distinct idea of God shows he exists. We find Locke (2006) doing something similar. God and the self are starting points from which to argue for knowledge through the senses. While the rationalists tended towards pantheism and mysticism (see Spinoza 2005), the empiricists ended in skepticism, unable to explain human nature or transcendent purpose (see Hume 1993).

Skepticism about God and the good

It is perhaps Hume’s skepticism that best explains modernity. Truths from reason cannot tell us about the world. It is only by experience that we can know about the world. And yet even this experience cannot be trusted. Causation (the basis for theistic arguments) is only constant conjunction in experience. The Gospel, received by testimony, relies on miracles that are contrary

to our experience. As such these beliefs of religion are not knowledge. Hume takes this so far as to say that there is no self but rather, when we look inside, all we see are a stream of mental images. No self. Having exposed the shortcomings of the classical system, the modern replacement concluded here.

These challenges from Hume formed the basis of Immanuel Kant's philosophy. Kant (1999) sought to solve Hume's problem about reason and the world. Analytic truths of reason (triangles have three sides) do not tell us if there are any triangles in the world. Kant's solution is that the truths of physics and geometry are synthetic a priori truths. God and the immortal soul must be posited to make sense of morality in this life but are not known by reason. They are the conclusions of transcendental arguments. Hume's critique of the theistic arguments was not solved by Kant. In philosophy, this continued the modern solution to religious divisions. Reasoning was now confined to geometry and the natural laws.

Religion, reason, and the modern world

Rather than challenge this limitation of reason, the religious, having already accepted the Westphalian solution to disagreements, embraced it. Although, in many ways, this was the continuation of medieval thinking found in formative thinkers like Aquinas who said that reason cannot conclude with God the Creator but must ultimately rely on special revelation. This was a continuation from the classical world, where Aristotle denied God the Creator altogether and instead said that reason leads to an unmoved mover co-eternal with the world and unaware of human activity. Aquinas called Aristotle 'The Philosopher' and as such, he represented the best that human reason could attain. Modernity had stripped away the vestigial organs of the classical world by beginning with the self and experience.

The religious looked to experience to justify their continued existence in the modern world. Special religious experience formed the beginning point of being religious and the justification for other religious beliefs. Merely this-worldly reasoning could not be expected to understand religious truths. The Reformation famously articulated the truths of *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia*. But from here, the divisions were explained as soteriological differences. Those who had been regenerated could understand and converted to the correct side, and those who had not been regenerated did not understand and were on the condemned side. Here was no method for resolving religious disputes but only assertion. If a person wondered on which side they belonged, then a special religious experience was needed.

This separated faith from reason. One could have faith, yet lack comprehension. Indeed, it was pious to speak of faith seeking understanding. Religious truths became reduced to claims about being saved from a future hell and going to a future heaven. Religion in the modern world was thus the

same as the ancient world: a set of rules/duties/rituals followed to guarantee blessings in, this life and the highest reward in the afterlife. When blessings in this life failed, it was due to the limitations of matter or as a test to show true faith. No progress could be reported in being able to conclude about the truths of religion: was it true that God alone has existed from eternity? There had been no progress to the highest good: virtue and happiness in this life with the vague promise of something better afterwards continued from the Egyptian mysteries through Aristotle down to the medieval and then modern worlds.

Reason and revolution

But the modern age had survived the Wars of Religion and was keen on not repeating them. John Locke (2006) argued for the universals of religion (morality, salvation, heaven) while promoting toleration on the details. Like the many ancient religions that differed on rituals or behaviour, these can be understood as the particulars all aiming to the universal truth. While the European countries like England and Germany continued to have state churches, the new United States took Westphalian peace to the next plateau and separated church and state. Many churches could thrive under the state because their differences need not interfere with the universal needs of humankind.

The French Revolution was marked by bloodshed, more like later Marxist revolutions. While exposing the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church and turning from superstition to worship reason, it had at its heart an anti-reason philosophy found in Rousseau (1968). Rousseau turned the state of nature story around and taught that the society formed as humans created a social contract is what makes humans immoral. Moral codes are a convention, and the authentic life is one free from social conditioning. This was a romantic philosophy that valued experience and intuition over reason that had been limited to geometry and instrumentalisation. It continues to hold influence over those who think that humans can be recreated by changing their environment. The dichotomy between Locke and Rousseau was traced by Allan Bloom (1987).

Reason and pragmatism

The pragmatic solution at the heart of Westphalia became the modern solution finding its best example in the United States. Here the American philosophy simply was called 'pragmatism'. Truth is what works. The American philosophy said that if a reasoning process is correct, it must have some measurable, real-life application. This measurable real-life application came in the form of experience. James (1982) assessed religious claims in terms of their impact on human life. Clifford (1997) did the same. And their assessment of

religion was opposite. James found some benefit in it, and Clifford saw it as a hindrance to advancement.

The English utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham heard the call for a method and offered a measurable outcome for morality. The good would lead to the happy. Happiness and misery could be measured. Pleasure and pain were material things existing in the shared objective world. Medieval appeals to natural law, like medieval appeals to superstition, were nonsense on stilts (Bentham 1987). But both the religious and the atheist laid claim to this method without any demonstrable solution. Pascal's (1995) wager was something along these lines as well. A mathematician, Pascal could offer the statistics of belief in God and good outcomes. A mystic, he could also appeal to the heart which has reasons that reason cannot understand. But neither the utilitarian nor the mathematician/mystic method could tell us if these beliefs are true or false.

More was taken from the religious through the advance of instrumental reason. The great problem that the theists faced was the problem of evil. In the ancient world Epicurus had stated it: If God is all good and all-powerful then why is there evil? (Hume 1998). It remains a problem in the modern world. Nature, supposedly the creation of God, was red in tooth and claw (Tennyson 2003). Darwin gave the solution that natural evil accounts for the origin of species. There has always been suffering and struggle, and this is what gives us the world as we see it. God is not a needed hypothesis in any area of life.

Reason and the dialectic

However, all pragmatists could agree on instrumental reasoning. Differences of opinion about the importance of belief in God and the afterlife could be left to the individual. But society could be run on efficiency. Indeed, many believed that this would bring about the eventual end of religion as it would be a dried-up vestigial organ that simply falls off. Here we remember Marx's (1997) famous claim that religion is the opiate of the masses. Like opium, religion is used to dull the pain of existence. But greater attention to justice and equality would make this unnecessary. Marxists weren't as quick to point out the Christian influence on his thinking about morality and society. Here was a pure materialist dialectic wherein history, society, and the individual were totally explained by instrumental reason. It was the materialisation of Hegel's dialectic of reason (Hegel 2004). All of the history could be understood under the dialectic. This process is God. All is God. This makes history inevitable. The Marxists could promise a postmillennial outcome of the earth being filled with the equal distribution of capital. All means are justified because the real is the rational. Similarly, we still hear Nietzsche's (2006) proclamation that God is dead, and we killed him. Or, Dostoyevsky (2003) saying that if there is no God, all things are moral. But these were still

just Kant's transcendental argument. God is necessary for theistic morality, and Nietzsche rejected theistic morality, and so had no need for God. Dostoyevsky equated theistic morality with all morality, and so without God, there is no morality. All that morality had done is to expose the unsound arguments about God from classical and medieval philosophy.

Reason and education

Reason in the modern age became limited to instrumental and critical reasoning. The narrative of the modern hero vanquishing the villains of superstition and cruelty gave the Enlightenment scientist a mythic dimension. And perhaps nowhere was this seen more than in education. Universal education was an important value of the Reformation. Teaching all persons to reason and think so that they could understand the message of the Bible was behind many other educational and scientific advances of the modern age. But since there was no solution found for reason to show that God exists or why these matters to human life (God and the good), more was needed than reading the Bible for other-worldly ends. John Dewey's pragmatism advanced religion beyond the other-worldly platonic forms and the religious desire to be saved in the afterlife and have a blessed journey of the soul.

Dewey (1997) developed an education that made students ready to solve the problems they would encounter in this life. The need for meaning is one of the problems that will face students in this life. But the limits of reason also narrowed meaning to material problems in this life. The platitude of training up the next generation of students that will leave the world a better place motivated many technological and agricultural developments. While the Marxists spread their materialist dialectic of reason over half the globe, the pragmatists claimed the other half for instrumental reason. Lofty claims in the name of reason from both gave perhaps the most miserable century in human history. The juxtaposition between the heights of human technology and the depths of human depravity kept the poets busy (Boris Pasternak 1991 and T. S. Eliot 2002 are examples).

Freud, positivists, and critical philosophy

Where the utilitarians and pragmatists seemed to leave some room for religion if it made the individual happy or solved material problems (perhaps in charitable organisations) Freud (1989) called on the modern man to face reality and come to maturity. Religion was a continued illusion and since it had harmful effects (keeping one in childish reasoning) it was a delusion. As Marx had transformed the dialectic of reason into the materialist dialectic, Darwin explained the origin of species through natural evil, Freud explained the origins of the self through the conflicts of early childhood development. Social control

is applied to the child in the name of morality and this creates inhibitions that can develop into neurosis. To be freed from this process would require the free expression of desire. But in an inhibitory society, this is not possible. Thus, a healthy society is one that endeavours to make this as real as possible. Neurosis is only cured by the unchaining of inhibitions. These inhibitions are largely about sexuality. Reason, therefore, tells the modern man that 'do what thou wilt is the whole of the law'. It isn't wrong to act on the sexual desire, what is wrong is telling someone that their desire is immoral. The freedom of the American Revolution turned into the licence of 'do what comes natural'.

In parallel development with Freud was logical positivism (Ayer 1952). Both aimed to conform the softer sciences to the hard sciences. Only testable propositions can be meaningful. Beliefs about God are not testable and are therefore not meaningful. Logic could develop a pure language free from all ambiguity. So we have a method for preventing all religious conflicts: set them aside as meaningless. Criticisms of logical positivism exposed its fundamental conflict, which is that it would not by its own method account for its own method. But it shares an approach with the later Frankfurt School and Critical Theory. The impediments to a final postmillennial victory of good over evil are the remaining superstitions on which social inequalities are based and through which they are justified. A critical philosophy exposes these to the light of reason and frees mankind to determine his own good and evil.

If earlier critical theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno could be pessimistic about reason, it was left to Habermas (1985) to identify the problem and provide a reasoned solution. The remaining problem in the modern world is the fragmentation of the individual and society. The first philosophy had failed. But cultural knowledge is a kind of pragmatic know-how passed along in society. The individual's life-world of the mind had been colonised. But through communication, that is oriented to achieving a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of claims that can be criticised, there is a rational method for problem-solving. The conflicting needs of the individual and society can be resolved through this rational process. This is the culmination of the logical positivist and critical theorist into a constricted rationality that requires empirical testability.

McDonaldisation of reason

The values of pragmatism were turned towards the world of marketing and sales as technology allowed for greater and greater production. Ritzer (2020) identified these values as efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. These come to be equated with rationality. Corporations, governments, and educational institutions could boast of a rational process by confusing reason with these values. Reasoning reached a new low. A dark age of the mind began, even as big education was promoted among more and more people. The

educated did not know how to use reason to solve the first problems about origin and purpose. To be educated meant to be trained for a vocation within this system. Needless to say, it was the humanities that suffered under this paradigm. Universities promoted the humanities as producing the kind of worker an employer desired.

Education as training vocation need not be in tension with education as learning to think. These overlap in many ways, even while they are different. But the values of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control did not teach the ability to think about and answer the basic questions of human existence. During the second half of the 20th century, there was an increase in students reporting issues of depression and anxiety.

Medieval hopes and the enlightenment success

Taylor (2007), in his *The Secular Age*, asks the question: Why did belief in God collapse in modernity? His answer is that reason cannot arrive at the knowledge of God. Knowledge or understanding as a cognitive endeavour will never be able to communicate truths about God. Instead, a return to the mystical, non-cognitive, approach of the medieval world is the way to find God. This allows for a non-literal, non-pragmatic way to connect to God. His solution, then, is to accept the modernist's claim that reason can be used to make technology but not to answer the first questions. If those questions are to be answered, we must look elsewhere.

Pinker (2018), in his *Enlightenment Now*, gives what could amount to a final defence of the modernist project. Touting all of the major advances since the Reformation in areas of education, health, economics, technology, and more, he seems to miss the point. All of the dystopian novels of the 20th century (for example, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) also had worlds with those developments. But there was no meaning. It is a pragmatist pointing to what efficiency and instrumental reasoning can do while not providing any purpose or meaning. Make the place more efficient for the next generation. Why? So, they can make it more efficient for the next generation. While there is still a way to go in spreading the benefits of modernity, there is no reason to think that this will free anyone from the effects of meaninglessness. At the pinnacle of human technological advancement, we hear the ancient preacher reminding us to get understanding at all costs because the alternative is 'vanity, vanity, all is vanity (meaningless)' (Solomon; Ecclesiastes).

Conclusion

Where both Taylor (2007) and Pinker (2018) accept the modern view of reason and embrace skepticism about reason's ability to answer the first

questions, an actual solution must show why this skepticism is mistaken. What you think of as unknown must be made known to you. If Aristotle discovered the laws of thought, he only shined their light into some areas but hindered their use in others. The Greek philosophers shaped the western world to the present either by encouraging an other-worldliness that looked to the forms and devalued this life or caused a this-worldly reaction embodied in Marxism and Pragmatism. This dualism (imperfect matter having existed eternally with the perfect forms/ideas) can and should be exposed to the light of reason. In doing so, we have a method that the Wars of Religion did not provide. If the material world has been striving from eternity to reach its final end, then either (1) it cannot reach the final end or (2) it has not actually been striving from eternity. With this simple argument, the laws of thought are applied to Aristotle's world. The same can be done for the modern utilitarian, pragmatic, and materialist.

What has happened that such use of reason had not been done in an overt and lasting one? One finds Philoponus (1987) arguing against Aristotle and the eternality of the world. But the great majority of Christian intellectuals of the medieval world called Aristotle 'The Philosopher'. Here was a failure to use the simple law of identity in application to God and the world. It was a violation of the law of non-contradiction in applying eternality to what cannot be eternal. The very highest of worldly wisdom was exposed as folly.

The method, needed from the start but especially called for in the Wars of Religion, is to identify assumptions and test them for meaning. Even Descartes, who boasted in doing first philosophy, did not do this. We live with the accumulated failure. But that is only more reason to stop and think. The assumptions of materialism, idealism, and dualism about what is eternal and real are in contradiction with the claim that only God is eternal. The differences among theists about the need for atonement or not (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the identity of the Lamb of God (Judaism and Christianity), the highest authority (Protestant and Catholic), and God's activity in the world (Providence and Deism) are all laid open to the critical use of reason. The beginnings of all historical conflicts are found in the lines above. Modernity was not an advancement from the Wars of Religion but an avoidance of using reason to solve the problem. But the problem is still there. The method is the critical use of reason to test for meaning. Meaning is more basic than truth (we cannot believe a proposition to be true or false if we do not know what it means). And meaning is lost when the laws of thought are violated. The problem has been one of the authority of reason. The shortcoming all along has not been in reason but in failing to use reason. The failures of modernity should not be an impetus to return to the failures of the medieval world but should be a call to stop, think, repent (turn around), and begin to use reason.

The current age exposes a collective lack of integrity. The worldly wise who sometimes boasted in reason did not use it to examine themselves. But

there was a voice speaking to this Greek world with another option. 'That which is unknown to you I proclaim to you' (Paul at Mars Hill, Athens). Act 17 reveals that this exposes a problem deeper than the intellectual pursuit of more information. It reveals the human relationship to reason/logos. It is not that humanity is doing its best, but that reason fails to illuminate why. Instead, they loved darkness rather than the light. Looking back on modernity and reason can tempt one to reject reason with all of the horrific atrocities of that age. But the failure is not in reason. Confucius spoke of the rectification of names as the only way to restore unity, and in Orwell's 1984, the act of renaming is referred to as doublespeak. Once 'reason' is misnamed and actually identified with skepticism then it would seem there is no hope. But even this misnaming is an act of reason and makes the light of the mind shine brighter by comparison. With a desire to never repeat modernity, the solution is to repent of the same negligence and have the integrity to put reason into practice.

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