

THE FUNCTION OF REASON

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The function of Reason is to promote the art of life.

—A. N. Whitehead.

THE present period in history has a strong claim to the title of "The Age of Unreason." During the past one hundred years, the forces of irrationalism have steadily advanced on all fronts, until now they constitute a major influence in Western civilization. Their handiwork is visible in both theoretical and practical affairs. At the level of theory it appears in the diverse products of philosophers like Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger and Sartre; in historians like Spengler, psychologists like Freud, theologians like Barth, and in a host of minor prophets whose efforts are reviewed with enthusiasm by the literary weeklies. At the level of practice, the works of the irrationalists are so multifarious as to beggar description. The eternal symbols here are Belsen, Buchenwald and Hiroshima. If additional illustrations are wanted, any copy of the daily press may be consulted with profit.

This situation confronts the friends of reason with a double task. They must become clearer than ever before about the principles for which they stand, and they must never rest from articulating their principles in a counter-challenge to irrationalism. The former task involves an appreciation of the historical sources from which the idea of reason sprang, together with an understanding of what the idea should signify to-day. The latter task requires the presentation of reason as the agency through which man can gain control of his destiny and rise to his full human stature. It requires, in other words, the elaboration of Whitehead's dictum that "the function of Reason is to promote the art of life."

There may be some who will judge this topic to be threadbare in the extreme. What can be said about it, they will ask, that is not just the threshing of stale straw? The answer, I believe, is that the times call for a re-examination of a well-known doctrine that is far from being widely accepted. The irrationalists are busy preparing "the wave of the future," and those who would not see mankind engulfed have an obligation to speak. Hence, the reiteration, however brief and halting, of a few homely truths may not be wholly superfluous at the present juncture of humanity's affairs.

I

Like so much else that is sound, the belief in reason originated among the Greeks. When the Ionian philosophers first sought for intelligible principles in the natural world, to replace the mythological opinions previously held, they took one of the most important steps in history. For their procedure implied that at the heart of things there lies not arbitrary mystery, but what Heraclitus called *logos*—a rational law capable of being grasped by the human mind. So exciting did this discovery prove, that the process of thinking about the world quickly took precedence over the observing of it. Even the materialist Democritus laid more stress on the results of reflection than on the deliverances of sense-perception. The consequence was that this early period produced a luxuriant crop of world-hypotheses, naive in content, yet bearing impressive marks of man's dawning rational powers.

Socrates was the first to bring reason to self-consciousness. He saw that reason as well as nature had a *logos* to which it must conform. This is the criterion of coherence or consistency. For Socrates the irrational was synonymous with the muddled and the contradictory. These are the characteristics of mere opinion, which prevails in the market-place, and is the opposite of knowledge, which is clear, precise and logically interconnected. Moreover, as long as men continue to guide their lives by opinion, they will remain ignorant of what they are really doing, and incapable of achieving what is good. Ignorance is the enemy against which reason must wage continual warfare.

Plato and Aristotle gave these ideas a more sophisticated reading. The former, impressed by the order and stability of mathematical discourse, made acquaintance with geometry a pre-requisite for entrance into the Academy. Geometry was the science that prepared human reason to deal with its proper objects, the Forms or Ideas—those supreme realities of which perceptible things were but imperfect reflections. Knowledge of the Forms, particularly of the Form of Good, was not simply a participation in a higher realm than that of earthly existence. It was also of enormous importance for the perfecting of man's individual and social life. However distasteful we may find some of Plato's proposals on the latter score, we cannot escape being impressed by the care with which they are deduced from his premises. The argument of the dialogues everywhere proclaims the apostle of reason.

Aristotle's contribution here was his codification of the principles implicit in the rational thought of his predecessors. Despite inevitable deficiencies, his *Organon* remains the great classic in the literature of logic. It provides a detailed analysis of the rules that must be obeyed if reason is to draw its conclusions validly. Subsequent advances in logic have merely supplemented, not invalidated, its findings. When we consider the *Organon* side by side with that other classic, Euclid's *Elements*, we realize how far the Greeks advanced in understanding reason on its formal side.

For a long time their account was taken to be the whole story. Reason continued to be conceived on the mathematical model, as the capacity for grasping absolutely certain first principles and inferring correctly what they implied. Not until the lesson of modern science began to be learned was the one-sidedness of this view recognized. The balance was then restored by insisting that observation and experimentation are as essential to the function of reason as deductive inference. The Greeks, of course, were far from ignorant on these matters. Aristotle and Archimedes, for instance, observed natural phenomena and conducted simple experiments. But the prevailing tradition considered such investigations an adulteration of thought rather than an enrichment of it. Only the combined achievements of Galileo, Vesalius, Harvey and Newton could begin to dispel that error.

It is now generally agreed that reason involves the two components of logic and evidence. Fidelity to the principles of valid inference, and fidelity to the facts of observation and experiment are equally required. This position entails a far-reaching modification of the Greek view. Reason is still regarded as the capacity for apprehending and discovering truth. But truth lies not in the necessary relations of abstract ideas to one another. It lies in the reference of ideas to objective reality, i.e., to something that is other than ideas. Moreover, the process of rational inquiry starts with certain hypotheses rather than with self-evident axioms. These hypotheses are suggested explanations of an existing problem or difficulty. They are put to the test by deducing from them a large array of consequences that future experience can confirm or confute. If the predicted results are sustained by observation in a number of cases, the hypothesis is considered to be true—not absolutely, but with a measure of probability. As it has grown older, reason has become more modest in its pretensions. Where

Greek and Mediaeval thinkers "proved" their absolute truths, contemporary believers in reason are content (for the most part!) to establish what is highly probable.

The growth of the physical sciences with which the above doctrine is associated, not only deepened man's comprehension of his world but enormously increased his control over it. Rational inquiry thus emerged as a process in which, as Bacon said, "human knowledge and human power meet in one." Theory directs practice, while at the same time practice illuminates theory. Yet the one-sided way this new notion of reason was treated made it a mixed blessing. For man's remarkable successes in mastering the physical world eclipsed the ancient truth that the Greeks saw so clearly: that reason must also be used by man to master himself. When the understanding and control of material forces exist side by side with ignorance and lack of control of human forces, the effect is bound to be lethal. Thus it has come about that the order and harmony man has discerned in the physical world have been tragically absent from his own personal and social relations. Here, in the words of Aristophanes, "whirl is king, having driven out Zeus."

II

Can man extricate himself from this evil situation by calling upon his rational powers? At least two groups of persons will reply with a resounding, not to say contemptuous, negative. The first comprises those who believe that man is so basically corrupt at the core of his being that nothing he can do will improve his lot. The second comprises those who believe that man is not a rational being at all, but a biological organism struggling for power over his fellows. The former group adopts complete pessimism with regard to the earthly future of humanity. The latter group finds in various forms of authoritarian control of the many by the few, the only effective solution. Both of these doctrines require a word of comment.

If the belief in the fundamentally corrupt or sinful nature of man is affirmed to be merely something accepted on faith, then no further discussion of it is either necessary or possible. But in fact the belief usually professes to be *true*, i.e., to be a description of what is the case with respect to the moral character of mankind. This puts it squarely in the arena of rational inquiry, where it must justify itself at the bar of logic and evidence. That is to say, it becomes a hypothesis capable of

being put to the test of observation. *Qua* hypothesis, it cannot be the negation of, but only an *alternative* to, the hypothesis that nothing prevents man from employing his reason "to promote the art of life." Since the latter view is not capable of being eliminated *a priori*, it at least remains free to be tried.

Are there any antecedent considerations that might lead us to prefer one hypothesis rather than the other? Certainly, the events of the last forty years appear to provide ample grounds for pessimism. What Gibbon called "the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind" have multiplied so appallingly that it almost seems as though some malevolent force were at work in the hearts of men. Even the most sanguine must have their moments of despair about the future. Yet if pessimism is to be a rational belief, it must take account of all the facts. When we thus attempt an impartial review of the situation we see that it is a mixture of black and white. The matter has been well put by H. D. Lewis in his *Morals and the New Theology*:

There have been senseless brutality, callousness, greed, a very lust for destruction; but there have also been heroism, endurance, self-denial, cheerfulness and humour in the grimmest hours of toil and suffering, a sense of companionship and a willingness to harness one's energies to a great cause. And if we turn from the good and ill in the nature and actions of men to examine the conditions in which we live to-day, while there are more deadly and terrifying engines of destruction than ever before, more effective organization for evil ends, the means of more absolute despotic rule, there are also more excellent remedies for ills of that kind. If we have the flame-thrower we have also penicillin, if we have the Spitfire we have also the collapsible dinghy, if we have the concentration camp we have the Red Cross . . . And so the story might continue.

Thus, the rational good labours even in the midst of the irrational evil. And as long as this is so, it must weigh heavily against any doctrine of universal depravity.

A more theoretical, but no less important, difficulty that confronts the above doctrine is also brought out by Mr. Lewis. He observes that the doctrine makes it exceedingly hard to give an intelligible account of moral responsibility. For if, through some mysterious cosmic disaster, all man's actions are infected so that he cannot consistently choose what is good and reject what is evil, not only is freedom of choice repudiated but individual moral responsibility is an illusion. Nobody can be blamed

for doing what is unavoidable. Mr. Lewis rightly sees in this view another reflection of that contempt for the individual that is part of present-day irrationalism. It is no accident, he thinks, that the New Theology has exhibited an affinity with certain forms of totalitarianism.

This brings us to those who affirm either in words or deeds a belief in the predatory nature of man. "Man is a beast of prey," declare Nietzsche and Spengler, articulating in theory what many have subscribed to in practice. For all such, the function of reason is to promote the achievement of power. Or since reason tends to be a somewhat inhibiting instrument, instinct and desire replace it as the guide to life. "Thinking with the blood" may even become a recommended mode of cogitation. From this perspective the world appears in the guise of a field on which is waged the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. To the victor go the spoils; and because the victor is the most powerful, the spoils will be individual wealth and influence, or participation in the political and economic control of the majority by a minority. For the believers in the creed of power, the present crisis in human relations is not a disaster. It is an opportunity.

The threat to reason inherent in such a position is obviously grave. The doctrine of man's inherent sinfulness is a rival *hypothesis* that decries as futile the plan to improve mankind's condition by rational means. The doctrine of man's inherent predaciousness is a rival *plan*, which if successful will subject reason to its arbitrary authority. For the two programmes are polar opposites. Reason by its very nature must rely on persuasion; its rival relies on force. Reason presupposes the widest possible freedom of inquiry; its rival presupposes the most rigid regimentation of inquiry. Reason respects the judgment and the worth of every individual. The doctrine of power rejects and despises them. The programme of reason, being impersonal, makes universal co-operation possible. The programme of power, since it represents private passions, makes strife inevitable.

Much, therefore, hinges on whether in fact man is "a beast of prey." Can he be truthfully described in that manner? Undoubtedly, he often acts like a predatory animal, and anyone who denied it would be a purblind idealist. But he also acts, in other situations, quite *unlike* one. If we are going to make a rational generalization, we cannot ignore the patent fact that while some men at some times are coarse, rapacious,

cruel and ego-centric, other men at other times are fine-grained, generous, humane and selfless. Again, the situation is a mixed one. Has the theory of biological evolution any relevance here? Occasionally it has been argued that man's development from more primitive forms through the struggle for existence and the survival of the strongest shows that he is "naturally" a being who must conquer or perish. The argument is a complete *non sequitur*. Admitting the impressive evidence for the evolution of man, it does not follow that he possesses *only* the characteristics of his non-human ancestors. This is like saying that a mature oak-tree is "only" an acorn! A genuinely developmental view has to recognize the possibility of wholly new qualities arising in the evolutionary process. The attribute of rationality, therefore, though it is a relatively recent arrival on the cosmic scene, may be infinitely more important for the possessors of it than anything belonging to an earlier stage of their history. Man's ancestors were in all probability beasts of prey. But man is *now* a being with reason—the power that makes him human.

Because there is no evidence for the Spenglerian position, we cannot conclude that the authoritarian policies that flow from it are disposed of. Indeed, these policies have a far broader basis than the conception of *homo lupus*, and are supported by many who would repudiate that conception. Absolute authority has a strong attraction for men in an age of confusion. Reliance on the dictates of some document, tradition, party or person seems simpler than settling questions by rational investigation. Yet if authority is expeditious it is also exacting. In return for dogmatic solutions it demands strict obedience. Furthermore, since in practice its mouthpiece will always be a human being or group of human beings, the control exerted is nearly always irresponsible. For absolute authority cannot by definition admit a higher court of appeal than itself. That is why potential competitors must be forcefully repressed. And that is why reason must perennially raise its voice against all authority not based on rational argument and not amenable to modification in the light of rational criticism.

III

The foregoing remarks have sought to give a rough sketch of the content of reason and have suggested that nothing prevents it from being the means of advancing humanity's welfare.

The crux of the matter has been represented as that of gaining a degree of understanding and control of man's personal and social relations, comparable to that possessed in the case of physical nature. Some further facets of this enormously complex task will be touched on in closing.

Is the task *merely* one of knowledge? Plato and the seventeenth-century rationalists considered it so. For them the evil that men do and the false opinions men hold arise from ignorance. Hence enlightenment is the one thing needful. Virtue is knowledge—a view unconsciously shared by those who argue to-day that mankind's ills are due to the fact that the social sciences lag so far behind the physical sciences. But another way of interpreting the situation seems more adequate. This is to recognize that not only knowledge, not simply intelligence, but love and good-will are essential to the improvement of man's estate. By themselves love and good-will are impotent; in conjunction with reason they can be irresistible. Thus, the first step in the understanding of man is the obvious one of admitting that reason is not enough. That judgment, however, is itself a conclusion of reason, made in the light of the evidence.

Another step is also suggested by the evidence. This is the adoption of the hypothesis that man is a "work in progress," a being whose evolution is not yet finished. As Lowes Dickinson put it in the final chapter of *A Modern Symposium*:

Man is in the making; but henceforth he must make himself. To that point Nature has led him out of the primeval slime. She has given him limbs, she has given him brain, she has given him the rudiment of a soul. Now it is for him to make or mar that splendid torso. Let him look no more to her for aid; for it is her will to create one who has the power to create himself. If he fails, she fails; back goes the metal to the pot; and the great process begins anew. If he succeeds, he succeeds alone. His fate is in his own hands.

Such a hypothesis rejects all static views of man because they fail to see that he is intrinsically a temporal and historical being. Illumination is found in the vision of a developing humanity, whose past has been mainly a blind struggle, but whose future is increasingly amenable to the regulation of reason.

If we take this approach, it is possible to give a plausible explanation of the duality in man's feelings, emotions and attitudes. For some of them are an inheritance from his prim-

itive ancestry, while others are an earnest of what he can become. Moreover, it is his reason that enables him to differentiate between the two groups. Reason tells him that hunger and pain, panic, fear and fury, lust, cruelty and cupidity are redolent of the jungle and the cave. Reason also tells him that the converse of these things—bodily well-being, equanimity, love, refinement and sensitivity—belong to the art of a truly human life. The former are among the chief evils, the latter among the chief goods of man.

But in addition to understanding, reason involves control. This control can only be of the evil in the interests of what is good. That is to say, reason both locates the good theoretically and collaborates with it practically. Such collaboration is the result of a rational decision, based on the recognition that any other course leads to self-contradiction and chaos. It is natural for the human intellect to seek order and coherence in its world. Where the realm of matter is concerned the order is discovered. Where the realm of conduct is concerned the order is imposed. In the domain of his own individual and social action man can be, as Kant insisted, "both law-giver and subject." The control that reason imposes here is, therefore, the source of genuine freedom. For man is free only when he obeys the laws that he himself has rationally made.

How in detail reason's control should operate is a topic beyond the purview of this essay. It must suffice to remark that the two most crucial areas seems to be education (in the widest sense) and social (including international) policy. Attention needs to be directed in each case to those objective conditions that block and distort the development of the good in man. Thus, so long as the training of the young proceeds in terms of arbitrary authority, emotionalism, indifference to truth, and vulgarity; so long as the economic organization of society permits gross inequalities of status, exploitation and insecurity; so long as international diplomacy is based on force and propaganda man's primitive traits will continue to luxuriate. The function of reason is to supplant such conditions with others more conducive to the unfolding of his higher qualities. This goal cannot be attained at a single blow. Each problem has to be attacked experimentally in the light of relevant hypotheses which may be put to practical tests. Nor is the enterprise ever likely to be completed. It is, however, one that requires to be undertaken far more intensively than at present, with the best knowledge and the firmest purpose available.

To-day countless human beings live "as on a darkling plain swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight." Yet above the clamor, the clear notes of reason sound, calling for the adoption of rational methods in the settling of differences, for adherence to truth, for respect of individual judgment, for the ideal of a society in which every person shall be able freely to realize his full potentialities. Whether this call will be heeded, even in part, we do not know. At the moment the irrationalists show few signs of inclining their ears unto wisdom. Yet the immediate alternatives before mankind are so simple that even the most ruthless seekers after power should be able to perceive them. We must devise a workable scheme of world-collaboration or be destroyed. And if we are to set our steps on the path of salvation, we must accept the fact that only reason and goodwill towards men can bring peace on earth.
