

Reason, Unreason, and the Conservative

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I am willing you should call this the Age of Frivolity, as you do: and would not object, if you had named it the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Fury, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of the Burning Brand from the Bottomless Pit: or anything else but the Age of Reason.

—John Adams

“THE STUPID PARTY” was the unflattering description John Stuart Mill gave for the Tories of his time. Dedicated to unverified “traditional truths” and often uncomfortable with even the thought of dissecting received opinion, extremely skeptical about the potency of individual human reason, conservatives have always been vulnerable to this charge of being “anti-intellectual” or obscurantist. Indeed, though their great works of political reflection are obviously the very fruits of reason, conservatives have on the whole taken a critical attitude to what Burke in his time called “the conquering empire of light and reason.”

Previous ages had also embraced reason, but to very different ends. Aristotle for example respected the received opinions of his day and attempted to discover the central truths which lay beneath traditional moral concepts. His is reason neither pyrrhonicly skeptical nor constrained by ideological rectitude; it is empirical without being arrogant. In the Christian Age Thomas Aquinas could by no means be called irrational, and the clarity of the Schoolmen is certainly without peer today; but the medieval philosophers came to different conclusions than did the *philosophes* in the Age of Revolution and their descendents today. Yet the syllogisms of the Schoolmen

are described by those baptized into modern philosophical thought as “pseudo-philosophy” since they have as a fundamental premise what the moderns see as “superstition.”

It is difficult to locate a historical origin for our current rationalistic age. Those who extol the *philosophes* would claim Aristotle in their distant ancestry. Richard Weaver would surely accuse William of Ockham. The Renaissance also was a time of renewed emphasis on natural science and the introduction with Machiavelli of a kind of “value-free” analysis of political relationships placing ends beyond human knowledge. But modern rationalists with their complete skepticism about and animus toward existing social arrangements are most directly the heirs of Francis Bacon and René Descartes, who defined knowledge as universal human agreement based on an infallible technique available to all: the scientific method. This narrow theory of knowledge is largely responsible for the prevalence of a mechanistic metaphor for reality and for the modern triumph of moral relativism, a perennial philosophical heresy which only in our age has presumed the robes of sacred truth. Ideas, especially ideas about the nature of knowledge, have consequences.

And it is here that the conservative most

decisively parts company with the liberal, for a fundamental concern of conservatives has been that the type of "moral science" promoted by the Enlightenment either has corroded or else is corroding the fabric of moral understanding which is necessary for social existence and which provides a dimension of human life which is both joyful and enlarging. Until conservatives address such central issues as the nature of knowledge, their critiques can only rattle within the walls of an alien system.

I

ONLY A FEW CONSERVATIVE thinkers in our century have analyzed Enlightenment "reason." One exception is the British political scientist Michael Oakeshott, who has addressed the problem of rationalism in politics. Yet because Americans are so decidedly children of the Enlightenment, to consider rationalism a "problem" sounds strange to our ears. Oakeshott describes his rationalist in the following way: "At bottom he stands (he always *stands*) for independence of mind on all occasions, for thought free from obligation to any authority save the authority of 'reason.'"¹ It is this freethinker, exalted by J. S. Mill, who is Oakeshott's (and the conservative's) adversary.

Oakeshott divides knowledge into two kinds: technical knowledge, which can be written in "how-to" books, and practical knowledge, which is intuitive and can neither be taught nor learned. These two kinds of knowledge are at once inseparable, yet distinct. The rationalist responds to such analysis by claiming that "practical knowledge" is not knowledge at all: Oakeshott has merely established a moot category, since we cannot empirically prove the existence of this second kind of "knowledge." Yet Oakeshott persuasively contrasts the "half-knowledge" which belongs to the rationalist with the whole knowledge of the educated mind. One example is an army officer. There is a world of difference between the newly-minted military academy graduate and

the experienced professional soldier. The experienced soldier knows the realities of war in a way which the new graduate cannot. The experienced soldier also knows how an army "works," though he may be wholly unable to describe this process. This is obvious to anyone, not least of all the new graduate, though pride might prevent him from admitting as much.

Oakeshott writes that the rationalistic mind may be called "well-trained," rather than "educated," for the rationalist's ambition is "not so much to share the experience of the race as to be demonstrably a self-made man."² To be praised as innovative or new is the greatest compliment, rather than to be praised (how ludicrous it sounds to modern ears) as virtuous or pious or consistent with what has gone before. This leads Oakeshott to conclude that "the sovereignty of 'reason,' for the Rationalist, means the sovereignty of technique."³ This impulse is well entrenched in American higher education. Every college freshman knows that to do well on a paper in a humane discipline he should find a "twist," sometimes called the "old switcheroo": "And so we see that *King Lear* is actually a comedy. . . ." Such innovation, if plausible, will earn the student praise and good grades. This ability to argue any side of any question demonstrates the importance of technique; but technique alone does not provide the student any insight into which view is true. Quite the opposite, it encourages virtuosity of argumentation for what is false, since to argue falsehood persuasively more fully demonstrates command of technique than to argue for what is true.

In part this emphasis on technique exists because the rationalist is in search of certainty. He is unwilling to let go at probability; thus if we can produce but one human being who holds internally consistent ethical principles which are at odds with those of the rest of the race, he has succeeded in "disproving" common values. If we are to arrive at certainty, we must start from certainty, hence, a certain technique, one which will work for anyone, anywhere, for any question. Certainty also

requires axioms grounded in what is lowest in human nature, since of these we can be certain. This leads us to rationalist politics, a desiccated technical politics of rote formulate. Politics becomes a technique for fulfilling "felt needs," whatever they may be, but it is incapable of answering which needs ought to be felt and ought to be fulfilled—the basic questions of politics and education for the ancient philosophers.⁴ Because of the complete capitulation of higher learning to the rationalistic mode of thinking, these questions are not addressed.

Finally, Oakeshott considers morality, the area in which the victory of rationalism is most dangerous. Oakeshott writes, "The morality of the Rationalists is the morality of the self-conscious pursuit of moral ideals. . . . This is represented as a higher morality . . . than that of habit, the unselfconscious following of a tradition of moral behavior; but, in fact, it is merely morality reduced to a technique. . . ."⁵ While analyzing moral systems and considering their historical origins are fine topics for intellectual stimulation, the rationalist often believes that discussion is a sufficient substitute for moral action. Consequently, the most amoral of people assume the role of moral savior in their act of liberating themselves and others from "false" or "constraining" morality. Oakeshott thunders, "Like the politics of the Rationalist, the morality of the Rationalist is the morality of the self-made man and of the self-made society: it is what other peoples have recognized as 'idolatry,' the idolatry of self."⁶ In a passage of great passion, Oakeshott describes a case of the rationalists in action: "First, we do our best to destroy parental authority (because of its alleged abuses), then we sentimentally deplore the scarcity of 'good homes,' and we end by creating substitutes which complete the work of destruction."⁷ Rationalism, historically and today as well, is a method not for achieving whole truths but for attacking tradition in the name of the subjective ego.

Eric Voegelin has also identified a recurring body of thought in Western civiliza-

tion which he contrasts with genuine philosophy. Voegelin's subject is the gnostic, who is characterized by six beliefs:

First, the gnostic is "dissatisfied with his situation."

Second, he believes that "the drawbacks of the situation can be attributed to the fact that the world is intrinsically poorly organized." At first this may seem to follow logically from the first point, but it is equally possible to presume that the "order of being," as given, is good and that it is the "fallen" men inhabiting the order who are inadequate. This latter option is the Christian insight against which the gnostic rebels.

Third, the gnostic believes that "salvation" from his unsatisfactory situation is possible.

Fourth, he believes that salvation will occur in history, this in contrast with the Christian assertion that the only salvation is by grace in death.

Fifth, the gnostic believes that the desired change in the "order of being" can be accomplished by human action, that the "salvational act is possible through man's own effort."

Finally, the gnostic seeks the prescription for change. "Knowledge—*gnosis*—of the method for altering being is the central concern of the gnostic."⁸

The Christian heresy of gnosticism is the first instance of this kind of intellectual pathology, though one of Voegelin's major contributions to political thought has been to trace the tendency through the centuries in such thinkers as Condorcet, Comte, and Marx. In Christian gnosticism, initiates were taught that man's current estate is the result of his having been "flung" from grace into the corrupt present reality. Only by coming to understand the essential goodness of man and the corruption of the "order of being" could the gnostic transcend reality and eventually accomplish his salvational act in history. The gnostic in modern times has secularized the elements of the Christian heresy but maintains the categories of gnostic thought. A premium is set on discovering

through reason that knowledge which will allow the gnostic to act in history for salvation. For example, Marxist theorists believe they have partially liberated themselves from their historical consciousness, allowing them to see their situation objectively. With this knowledge, they can hasten the coming of world communism. The same was true of Comtean positivists. Through positive science—reason—the positivist could lead the world out of the metaphysical age into the age of science. We see, therefore, that Voegelin's modern gnostic is essentially Oakeshott's rationalist become activist.

We must stress that for the rationalists and the gnostics, as indeed for all adjusted modernists, the "problem" of the human condition lies in something external to man. The liberal appears to have endless optimism that one more reform (historically, some extension of the franchise) will establish justice among men. When his reform inevitably fails to usher in the Millennium, he simply moves on to the next reform. This provides for perpetual moral activity, and in fact some reforms do improve the human condition. The difficulty arises when the liberal refuses to recognize the harm his reforms produce together with the benefits. Today when the liberal begins to understand the harm he has wrought, he is classified as a "neo-conservative." Marxists see the problem as lying even deeper than the level of political forms: the problem for them is in the institution of private property. When The Revolution comes and property is abolished, then human beings will have a totally different consciousness, and corruption will cease. But other than The Revolution, never well described, we are given no idea of how exactly this qualitatively new consciousness will come into being; the Marxist simply has faith that it will indeed appear once private property has disappeared.

Only the conservative is ready and willing to admit that the real human predicament is the depraved nature of man *qua* man. Eliminate original sin, and then some substantial amelioration of man's lot

becomes really possible. But this requires the grace of God; certainly no action of man is sufficient. The fundamental cause of injustice among men, therefore, cannot be eliminated in history regardless of how we order our affairs. This rather unpalatable fact is rejected out of hand by the liberal, who arbitrarily and against all evidence defines man as naturally good.

When the rationalist sets out to formulate an ethical theory, he is presented with the difficulty that he himself has introduced. If moral reasoning is liberated from traditional knowledge and we cannot argue from fact to value, how do we know which ethical notions are true? Since there are a myriad of notions of what is right or wrong, how can we rationally choose correctly? This was not a pressing problem for eighteenth-century liberals, for in their time traditional morality remained habitual. But having separated fact from value, the modern world has manufactured increasingly diverse moral possibilities. The "walls of politics" have begun to crumble, since liberal society, unable to agree on much of anything, least of all an epistemology, can only corrode the moral consensus which supports democratic institutions.

While Kant proposed a moral system based on the universalization of moral imperatives, his difficult ideas are not as much favored by moderns as that crude but immediately comprehensible rule of thumb: utilitarianism. While refined versions of utilitarianism have established more palatable definitions for utility than "pleasure and pain," Bentham's original formulation in practical fact remains the criterion by which the modern lives his life. When short-term pleasures have negative long-term consequences, utilitarianism adapts by adding a "long-run" clause. Other iterations have equated utility with "personal integrity," and some utilitarians have noted that people are truly happy only if they are acting according to their "values." (Of course this provides no guidance as to which values people ought to have.) There have been ingenious schemes to accommodate the hard

choices life sometimes presents us by elaborating an ethic in which we are always allowed to maximize utility, but we may also sometimes act in accordance with some other personal ethic. Still, utilitarianism has never been able to cope successfully with that objection: I agree that *x* maximizes utility, defined as *y*, but still, ought I to do *x*? Also, no matter how sophisticated the construction of utilitarianism may be, it has never begun to approach the fullness of moral truth of the elder systems which also contained notions of human happiness, such as Christianity (true happiness is obedience to God's will) or pagan philosophy (true happiness is living in accordance with virtue).

Aristotle and Plato, for example, mention a kind of utility; a *polis* is good insofar as it is full of happy people. But both are quick to point out that people can be truly happy only if they live in accordance with virtue. The fact of personal happiness is epiphenomenal; the important thing is living correctly. The just man is also the happiest man, even though as Aristotle says, men generally "consider any amount of virtue to be adequate, but wealth, goods, power, reputation, and all such things they seek to excess without limit" (*Politics*, 1323a35–37; see also *Republic*, 352d–354c). The ancients were fully aware that human beings seek to maximize their self-interest in this way, but because of this fact, their philosophy was predicated on justifying the effort to overcome purely self-interested motivations. It is at odds with the hedonistic rule of Bentham.

Burke also speaks of the long-term, true interests and happiness of the people of a state as a measure for judging political arrangements. Unlike de Maistre, he does not repair to divine right but to practical political experience: what works. Because of this he is sometimes described as a precursor of the utilitarians.⁹ The utilitarians, after all, were primarily interested in social reform to alleviate the suffering brought about by the industrial revolution; we can safely speculate that Burke would agree with such a goal. But

Burke's meaning still has more in common with Aristotle than with Bentham. People will be happy because they have done what they ought to have done; people will be truly happy only if they are virtuous in the traditional sense.

In short, the rationalist with his emphasis on the scientific method really has a grave difficulty if he seeks to discover moral truths. He has only two basic options. He can capitulate and come to the conclusion that the world is absurd, or he can invent some "religion of humanity" based on the principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number," with an arbitrary definition of "good." Most often the rationalist's values are "biological values," grounded in what is lowest in man rather than in what is highest. While the rhetorical moral orthodoxy of liberal society is the absence of orthodoxy (and this is used to attack traditional morality), the operative moral orthodoxy of liberal society is a vulgar utilitarianism.

II

EDMUND BURKE BELIEVED that "Art is man's nature." This epigram expresses his disdain for the attempts of the *philosophes* to prescribe behavior to man in civil society on the basis of a view of man in a state of nature. For the rationalist, this is necessary to achieve a "rational" set of values; without this abstraction, the rationalist would be faced with gross relativism. By taking the natural to be normative, the rationalist can break his own rule and argue from "is" to "ought." For Burke, however, an attempt to legislate ethics for Man is absurd, since there is no such thing as Man, only men, and men are more complex than the billiard ball-men of the *philosophes*.

The conservative is skeptical about modern reason because reason must simplify; it must exaggerate; it must generalize. It would be impossible for it to do otherwise. One important way in which the rationalist mind must simplify in order to act on the world of experience is to posit this abstraction, Man, as the unit about which political regimes are to be

organized. Of course because the true nature of man is speculative, we have the nasty problem of different thinkers attributing to man different characteristics. Hobbes's natural man is rather a brute, whereas Rousseau's is, if not kindhearted, then at least not vicious. Such is the problem of *a priori* reason, yet such reason is the basis for rationalist/liberal thought. An additional problem is the dismissal of all but the biological nature of man, the ignoring of the entire range of the spiritual.

In his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, C. S. Lewis raises the question of how a student should consider cultural differences which produce literary variety across the centuries. Lewis notes:

A method often recommended may be called the method of The Unchanging Human Heart. According to this method the things which separate one age from another are superficial. Just as, if we stripped the armour off a medieval knight or the lace off a Caroline courtier, we should find beneath them an anatomy identical with our own, so, it is held, if we strip off from Virgil his Roman imperialism, from Sidney his code of honour, from Lucretius his Epicurean philosophy, and from all who have it their religion, we shall find the Unchanging Human Heart. . . .¹⁰

Such human attributes as personal philosophies or religions are perceived by the rationalists as "mere superstructures" built up on top of the common foundation of natural man. In a sense, the rationalists are right. These are "superstructures," but not mere superstructures, for a person is a complex integration of levels of being and knowing, and to demand that what is art in man take nature alone as its starting point is to degrade man rather than to elevate him.

Lewis examines Milton's text and comments on the criticisms of his contemporaries. One critic invites us "to study what there is of lasting originality in Milton's thought and especially to disentangle from theological rubbish the permanent and human interest." Lewis insists, however, that "Milton's thought, when purged of its theology, does not exist."¹¹ Therefore, we

can only understand the poem from the viewpoint of belief. Approached in this way, Lewis finds that Addison was right when he wrote, "The great moral which reigns in Milton is the most universal and most useful that can be imagined, that Obedience to the will of God makes men happy and that Disobedience makes them miserable." Yet this is the very theme which many modern critics ignore. Why? Lewis answers: "I think we must suppose that the real nature of the Fall and the real moral of the poem involve an idea so uninteresting or so intensely disagreeable to them that they have been under a sort of psychological necessity of passing it over and hushing it up. . . . If there is no God, then Milton's poem, as interpreted by Addison, has no obvious relation to real life."¹² This is the agenda of the modern critic. His rational soul has shrunk, and he does not understand how Milton could actually consider this old and "hackneyed" theme of obedience to God worth writing a great book about. The modern critic must therefore confirm that Milton is like the modern critic in his assumptions about the world; he must prove that all great men are pretty much alike, that is, pretty much like the modern critic. The conservative view of man, however, is more complex, trying however imperfectly to comprehend the levels of what is human together with the complex ways men know.

III

A PERENNIAL PROBLEM for conservatives, however, is reconciling epistemologies. Burke deplored the *a priori* systems of the "logic choppers" who invented plans for "just" societies out of thin air, and he stressed experience or practicality instead. In this respect, Burke's epistemology is empirical and largely utilitarian; he says that government "is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants."¹³ In this remark, he is contrasting a relatively limited role for government against the more expansive view that governments secure rights, but still, implicit in the statement is the utilitarian no-

tion that government is nothing more than a tool for fulfilling desires. Yet in other statements, Burke can be found defending traditional Christian morality and natural law ethics. These are based not on "experience," but rather on something the empiricist considers even worse than *a priori* logic: revelation. How one reconciles an empirical/utilitarian view of government with a social ethic based on speculative reasoning from revelation is conservatism's epistemological problem. To challenge the Age of Reason, the conservatives must find a convincing synthesis.

As a practicing politician, Burke had no sympathy for the *philosophes* and their abstract ideas of government, and he recognized rationalism in the politics of the Jacobins:

They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men; . . . They have "the rights of men." Against these there can be no prescription; against these no agreement is binding; these admit no temperament, and no compromise: any thing withheld from their full demand is so much of fraud and injustice. . . . The objections of these speculators, if (a government's) forms do not quadrate with their theories, are as valid against such an old and beneficent government, as against the most violent tyranny. . . .¹⁴

Since such rationalist speculation posits perfect conditions (not unlike the "perfect market" concept of the economists), it is a blueprint for continual revolution in an imperfect world. Not only is Burke passionately opposed to revolution as such, but he also knows that perfection is not a category for this world. He is much more impressed with what good can be found in an experienced political order than by what "might be."

In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, the great Tory Samuel Johnson foreshadows Burke's belief in the "tried and true" with his theory of aesthetic knowledge. He writes:

To works . . . of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon prin-

ciples demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared; and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favor.¹⁵

Here is an empirical theory for knowing aesthetic (or moral) truths. On similar grounds, C. S. Lewis would in our century elaborate his concept of the *Tao*, the way of the moral life which is common across cultures. He accomplishes this through a comparison of the epigrams and folk wisdom by which civilizations live, and he finds more to compare than to contrast. Since there is consensus across cultures and times about certain broad principles, we can know that certain broad moral categories are true and judge popular ethical theories by how they conform to this consensus.

In this is the kernel of Burke's assertion that "the species is wise," and also of Willmoore Kendall's concept of the "deliberate sense." In both these formulations lies a great deal of faith in the wisdom of the people. But what, one immediately objects, of the fact that the values conservatives cherish have been out of vogue for decades at least and perhaps for several centuries? If the conservative attributes this to "false consciousness," then how can we judge false from true consciousness? This is a problem which must be addressed by a broader interpretation of how the conservative knows.

Burke, for example, uses aesthetic criteria as a measure of political and moral truth. Throughout his works we see a strong tendency to equate the true and the good with the sublime and the beautiful. This is true in human affairs, for human experience is simply different from the experience of billiard balls. Ideas of faith, morality, beauty, love are parts of us which cannot be ignored, yet that is what reason strives to do. By itself therefore, it is barren. Burke writes with scorn:

But now all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of moral imagination . . . are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.¹⁶

Here is an apparent acceptance of Keats's formulation, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." We can know in style the goodness or baseness of some qualities. The essential ugliness of socialist aesthetics (*e.g.*, the apartment blocs of East Berlin, utterly boring official Czech painting, the contrived Soviet novels) is sufficient reason to presume that there is something very wrong with socialism. The Southern conservatives have a particularly interesting body of thought on this subject: a society should be judged by the kind of men it produces, for men are in part works of art.

Beyond this alternative, however, is a definite conservative ambivalence to "experience" itself, an ambivalence which prevents conservatism from being simply a kind of cockeyed positivism. In this vein, Richard Weaver writes that it is patently absurd for one to believe that "experience will tell us what we are experiencing."¹⁷ What then can tell us what we are experiencing? Perhaps the most compelling conservative answer has been the moral imagination guided by religious faith.

IV

IN THE END ALL certain valid arguments are arguments from definition. The major premise of a syllogism is in essence a definition, and mathematical and geometric proofs begin at some point with definitional axioms. The same is true in the normative sphere. If we are utilitarian in our ethics, we may claim that our system is one of pure empirical reason, but somewhere in our argument we must define that the greatest good for the greatest number ought in fact to be done.

The really hard part of valid (strictly rational, if you will) argumentation is to begin with definitions which are true. It may often be the case that what maximizes utility is good, but is the definition therefore true? Or is it only a partial truth coincidentally coinciding with the *logos* which cannot be apprehended through simplistic rationalistic means? It appears that the conservative must opt for the latter understanding.

One peculiar concern of many conservatives has been the maintenance of religious belief and practice. More than any other group in contemporary liberal democratic societies, the conservatives argue that morality is impossible unless anchored in theology; the more subtle conservatives like Weaver argue further that knowledge itself is impossible apart from God. Perhaps the greatest prejudice we witness today among educated Americans is their complete contempt for the possibility of revelation as a way of knowing. With the Church-State separation as recently promulgated in the United States, elite opinion announces that the claims of revelation are false, irrational, and we can therefore be indifferent to them.¹⁸

Conservatives, however, take the claims of revelation very seriously indeed. Burke writes, for example,

We know, and *what is better, we feel inwardly*, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and of all comfort. . . . We know . . . that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long (*italics mine*).¹⁹

When Burke speaks of religion, he means Christianity, and at times he is willing to break with general utility to indulge the Church. Empirical principles and measures such as utility allow us to approximate the *logos*, but only that. The knowledge gained by experience is therefore not certain, but probabilistic. What is most important is the conservative insistence on or faith in *logos*, however difficult it is to apprehend, for *logos* is by

definition external to us and not a creation of our will.

But does revelation provide us with knowledge? Yes, in the same way other experience does, which is to say probabilistically. The conservative may experience revelation as history and also as personal understanding. Revelation-as-history provides the believer with a complex moral system. Revelation-as-personal-experience provides the believer with the knowledge that there is a moral system which is *true*. Eric Voegelin writes:

God reveals himself in his nature to Moses with the expression, "I am who I am." As the formulation in the Epistle to the Hebrews is the basis of Thomas' theology of faith, so that in Exodus is the basis of his teaching on God. Again, one can say of the latter formulation only: That is all. In the contact the human soul in the world has with the beyond, nothing is discovered but the existence of God. Everything beyond this belongs to the realm of analogical-speculative deduction and mythic symbolization.²⁰

So the content of natural law involves speculative reason, but speculative reason grounded in the revealed, experienced knowledge of the existence of the Other. But this is a terribly weak foundation on which to build an intellectual superstructure, so weak that the Israelites soon after the revelation to Moses reverted to the old gods. The One True God requires a degree of faith, an element of human experience which the shriveled rationalism of the modern cannot comprehend; yet when it is comprehended, all things are transformed, including the nature of the intellectual enterprise.

Modernity has sneered at traditional religion and dismissed the possibility of revelation. Reason loosed from the knowledge of revelation has led to the multiplication of doubts, not only about the truth of religion but also about all truth. Yet as T. S. Eliot has written, only in the complexities of a higher religion do both doubt and faith have proper places:

A higher religion is one which is much more difficult to believe, so the more conscious

becomes unbelief: indifference, doubt and skepticism appear. . . . It is more difficult also to make behaviour to conform to the moral laws of the religion. A higher religion imposes a conflict, a division, a torment and struggle within the individual; a conflict sometimes between the laity and the priesthood; a conflict even between the Church and State.²¹

Doubt must be part of a higher religion, but it should not obscure the truth behind the doubt itself, the imperative of that which has been revealed. Because of this dynamic which a "higher religion" introduces into a society, it is at once civilizing and difficult. In a lazy age such as ours, which has separated fact and value and which therefore does not know a good definition for "civilized," it is merely difficult, a hang-up. Silly.

What can be known through revelation? Little. Perhaps only the existence of God, the Other. But that is sufficient. That is sufficient to refute those rationalists who build their ethics without relation to God, since with that revelation we know that the modern rationalists and their constricted epistemology cannot accomplish what they seek to accomplish. The transcendent order is the framework for the temporal order, and this must be accounted for in our thinking on questions of value, for it is really in the transcendent order that even our most mundane concepts find their moral imperative and their truth as emanations of God's reason. So it seems that these dual conservative epistemologies—practical experience and transcendent revelation—have roles to play at different levels of human experience. Edmund Burke with his utilitarian calculations assumes he is working for the good of a society seeking to live in faith, and Richard Weaver expresses the need for such a dualism which is lacking in contemporary society:

That there is a world of ought, that the apparent does not *exhaust* the real—these are so important to the very concept of improvement that it should be superfluous to mention them. . . . The prospect of living again in a world of metaphysical certi-

tude—what relief will this not bring to those made seasick by the truth-denying doctrines of the relativists. To bring dualism back into the world and to rebuke the moral impotence fathered by empiricism is then the broad character of our objective.²²

To those who question Johnson's experiential theory of knowledge, the natural law provides an answer. As Father Parry has pointed out, "The good man can recognize evil . . . but the evil man cannot recognize good."²³ The good moral life is enlarging, creating new horizons and deeper understanding. The bad moral life is constricting, sealing off possibilities and understanding. Because of these facts, when we hear those today stating that there is no right or wrong, we know where they themselves stand. Such is the nature of moral truth. Just as C. S. Lewis pointed out, those who are not within the *Tao*, those who cannot even see moral truth in its broadest outlines, need not be attended to, for they are moral idiots. To allow them an influence in moral debate, let alone a decisive influence as is now the case, would be akin to asking the blind man to lead you on a tour of an unknown city. Still, it must be remembered that this is not a prescription for formal political censorship, only an observation on what makes a society healthy. The real damage of unrestrained liberalism lies not in its juridical freedoms but in the way it subtly erodes a culture by denying any truth but "doubt" or "openness."

V

WHAT WE HAVE SAID might lead the reader to believe that conservatives are hostile to reason. This would be to misunderstand the nature of the conservative critique of rationalism. On the contrary, conservatives, as we saw in the stress on experience, are strongly inclined toward reason and are willing to take its fruits most seriously. Where conservatives differ is in their distrust of reason alone; this is not the only way of knowing. On the other hand, while initially the moral system of rationalistic liberalism is utilitarianism, liberalism's "official orthodoxy" of no-

orthodoxy leads to reason's abnegation. If we accept the strict code of empirical reason in all matters, we soon find that there is no way to produce any values convincingly (to the satisfaction of all), and we fall into unreason. When knowledge is exposed to the scrutinizing eye of pure rationalism, rationalism itself gives way in a cascade of diverse epistemologies and ethics, all plausible, none provable.

The nihilist has given up entirely and is the one rationalist who seems to have taken his self-imposed restraints seriously. We might admire him for his sincerity, but we might also wonder why he has not taken the next rational step, that of self-destruction.

The positivist denies all knowledge not grounded in certainty; but since the most rigorous skepticism applied universally yields no ground for certainty in our world, he resides in method. The logical positivism of our century can only clarify statements and try to make them internally consistent. Positivism cannot discover any truths beyond the "truth" of clarity.

The deconstructionist attempts to break out of "logocentrism," having given up even on clarity. As he has determined, by reason, that communication itself is impossible, he slowly descends into gibberish, and this is the truth he communicates to us.

The historicist argues that all is contingent upon history. There is no knowledge out of context, no general laws, no moral codes, nothing absolute. Therefore, there are no categories which can be studied as such. He is entirely lost in the particular and having faced moral relativism fully, has no method for choosing the true. He has no grounds for criticizing what is, for what is must be good.

The radical feminist epistemologist has gone so far as to claim that the scientific method itself is biased. Decrying male thinking as "linear," she presents a case for female thinking, dubbed "connective." In this assertion is the implicit assumption that all modes of thinking are created equal, an article of faith it seems.

The "New Age" religionist, increasingly

common among well-educated Western youth, has come through reason full circle to an amusing mysticism in which supernatural beings counsel the living that people "create" their own "reality" (even as this strange other reality is telling them so). "New Age" religion is an example of modernity's pathetic attempt at self-therapy, a groan, a cry for help.

Perhaps worst of all is the Nietzschean and the fascist who (admittedly, wrongly) takes from Nietzsche a basis for his creed. Nazism in particular embraced irrationality for its own sake. In a world without meaning, the Nazis created their own meaning under the legitimizing stamp of the will to power. Though the Nazis may have perverted Nietzsche's teachings, the predisposition to equate will with right is inherent in Nietzsche himself, perhaps his greatest "contribution" to modern political thought.

This is where value-free reason leads us: to the conclusion that we create our own reality and that the only reality is power. Pure rationality forces us to admit the validity of irrationality. And when rationality so self-destructs, we are left with only a contest of will, a brutish struggle for power. As Peter Stanlis has noted, ancient natural law theory grounded itself in an objective measure which is prior to human will.²⁴ Modern natural right theory is based, however, on subjective human will. This is the difference between Hobbes's embrace of arbitrary will and Cicero's invocation of Right Reason, but if we rely on reason alone, then we find our-

selves embracing unreason. We see this most graphically when the modern-day radical with clenched fist chants the well-known refrain, "Power": Power over oppressors, Power over the crowd, Power over nature, Power for its own sake. This very radical might earlier have had calm discussions about "justice," the justice of a rationalist's theory—say, Rawls's. Now that rationalism completes its course, he stands and chants for Power. Such is the outcome when reason achieves its own negation, and this is where progress has led us today.

¹Michael Oakshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (New York, 1962), p. 1. ²*Ibid.*, p. 2. We might say that the conservative, on the other hand, is "open" to old ideas, which the modern rationalist is not. ³*Ibid.*, p. 11. ⁴*Ibid.*, p. 27. ⁵*Ibid.*, p. 35. ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 36. ⁷*Ibid.* ⁸Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics & Gnosticism* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 86, 87. ⁹See Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the 18th Century* (New York, 1929). ¹⁰Clive Staples Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* (London, 1942), p. 61. ¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 64. ¹²*Ibid.*, p. 70. ¹³Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Middlesex, 1968), p. 151. ¹⁴Burke, pp. 148, 149. ¹⁵Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," in *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, W. K. Wimsatt, ed. (New York, 1960), p. 23. ¹⁶Burke, p. 171. ¹⁷Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948), p. 13. ¹⁸For an alternate strand of Supreme Court decisions on the issue of church and state between 1931 and 1963, see the *MacIntosh*, *Zorach v. Clauson*, and *Abington* cases. ¹⁹Burke, pp. 186, 187. ²⁰Voegelin, p. 110. ²¹T. S. Eliot, "Notes Toward the Definition of Culture," in *Christianity and Culture* (New York, 1948), pp. 141, 142. ²²Weaver, pp. 130–31. ²³Father Parry, "Tradition and Reason," in *What Is Conservatism?*, Frank S. Meyer, ed. (New York, 1964), p. 112. ²⁴Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor, 1958), pp. 16–42.