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JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Chapter Title: Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment

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Book Title: What Is Enlightenment?

Book Subtitle: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions

Book Editor(s): James Schmidt

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.1525/j.ctt4cgf8z.29>

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Reason Against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment

Max Horkheimer

The collapse of a large part of the intellectual foundation of our civilization is to a certain extent the result of technical and scientific progress. Yet this progress is itself an outcome of the fight for the principles which are now in jeopardy, for instance, those of the individual and his happiness. Progress has a tendency to destroy the very ideas it is supposed to realize and unfold. Endangered by the process of technical civilization is the ability of independent thinking itself.

Reason today seems to suffer from a kind of disease. This is true in the life of the individual as well as of society. The individual pays for the tremendous achievements of modern industry, for his increased technical skill and access to goods and services, with a deepening impotence against the concentrated power of the society which he is supposed to control. He is ever engaged in modeling his whole existence, down to the minutest impulse, after prefabricated patterns of behavior and feeling.

These developments in the individual are the by-products of developments in industrial society. By the application of the industrial division of labor to the realm of the spirit, scientific reason has been separated from religious truth. Science, as a well-defined profession, sharply demarcated from philosophy, has almost relinquished its prerogative to tackle the most decisive problems of human existence. It may claim to probe occasionally into the functional significance of values, but their discovery, expression, or

These remarks are based on studies in which Theodor W. Adorno and the author have been engaged for a number of years. Some of the results are contained in two books to be published this year: Eclipse of Reason (New York: Oxford University Press) and Philosophische Fragmente (Amsterdam: Querido). [Originally presented as a lecture at the Twentieth Annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association, Eugene, Oregon, December 28, 1946. Reprinted by permission of S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt am Main. © 1985 Fischer Verlag GmbH. Philosophische Fragmente was the original title of Dialektik der Aufklärung—Ed.]

justification rests with other branches of culture. It abandons the definition of human aims to religion, the struggle for such aims to politics, and their dissemination to the mass media of communication. With regard to the blueprint of intellectual activities in our society, scientific thought is at best the supervisor, the architect being anonymous. If the scholar raises his voice against the use to which his findings are put, he speaks as a citizen, not as a scientist. Not only must he step out of his own special province in order to discuss such problems, but in the light of the strict separation of science from any other intellectual endeavor he cannot believe that the idea of truth, as it is implied in his research, might also apply to the ultimate decisions of society or the individual. Science is impartial with regard to what should be. It is devoted to means, whatever end may be served. Religion, in turn, is isolated on its reservation, neutralized and well protected within the modern world of industry. True, it fulfills, together with other culture-forms, important functions of social control. Yet, with the deliverance of Faith from the deadly struggle with secular Reason, much of its original substance seems to have dwindled away. Religion's fight against its enemies on the political scene has almost superseded its fight against the doubts within man's conscience. The emphasis is on its wholesomeness, on its contribution to civilization rather than on the truth of its specific doctrines. Religion is concerned with man's goals and destiny, science with truth alone. It is this division between the search for knowledge, on the one hand, and the evaluation of norms, on the other, which threatens to destroy all meaning.

The decay of independent thought in the individual and the dichotomy between scientific and religious truth in society are only two symptoms of the same dilemma characterizing our era. Philosophy, almost synonymous with Reason, should at least be able to show how the catastrophe came about. As technical civilization has emerged from precisely that undaunted Reason which it now is liquidating, Reason must reconstruct the history of its vicissitudes—try, as it were, to recollect its origins and understand its own inherent self-destructive trends and mechanisms, “for all inquiry and all learning is but recollection.”¹ The overwhelming achievements of Reason in the domination of nature, both physical and psychological, have rendered it forgetful of the sacrifices by which these achievements were attained. Therefore today's mentality and wisdom, penetrating as they are, include an element of blindness and fanaticism.² Reason's ability to render an account of its transformation from the power by which the meaning of all things is perceived, to a mere instrumentality of self-preservation, is a condition of its recovery.

One specific development in the history of philosophy will exemplify the self-destructive tendency of Reason. The eighteenth century in France has been called the era of Enlightenment. The school of thought to which this

term refers includes some of the greatest names of human history. The movement was not limited to a small elite but had a broad base in the French middle class. However, it was in the philosophical works of the *encyclopédistes* that the idea of enlightenment received its classical formulation. We might characterize this movement by two quotations from Voltaire: "Oh, philosopher," he exclaims, "the experiences of physics well observed, professions and industry, there you have the true philosophy."³ The second quotation, taken from the same work, is: "Superstition sets the whole world in flames; philosophy extinguishes them."⁴ The movement of Enlightenment, so typical of Western civilization, expresses the belief that the progress of science will finally do away with idolatry. Indeed, there are good reasons for this prediction.

Men have always been haunted by innumerable fears. In preliterate culture, the world was conceived in terms of evil forces, subject to control through propitiatory acts and magic. The process of emancipation from this conception of the universe is the predominant motive in the history of human culture. Each conquest of science has carried the attack deeper into the realm of fear. Science gives to man the power over that which earlier seemed completely under the control of uncanny forces. The awe of nature as an overwhelming unpredictable Being has been replaced by confidence in abstract formulae.

Thus nature changes its aspects. In the preanimistic age, nature bore the aspect of the terrible overwhelming entity Mana: then it assumed the mask of many spirits and gods who were characteristically vague and undefinable. In the epic poems of humanity such as those of Homer, gods took on clear contours; in classical philosophy as in that of Plato the gods were transformed into eternal concepts and ideas, or as by Empedocles into the elements of all things. Eventually, mythology, as the adequate expression of man's relationship with nature, vanished and mechanics and physics took its place. Nature lost every vestige of vital independent existence, all value of its own. It became dead matter—a heap of things.

Nevertheless, mythology has survived in various spheres of thought and behavior throughout the centuries. Idolatry is present in any absolute devotion to a finite entity, whatever it may be: a human being or a land, nature, or tradition. Thus, in romantic love, the beloved individual is deified; life and death depend on the favor or disfavor received from the adored. The reverence directed toward one's ancestors and the craving for immortality exemplify mythological reactions. In the absence of any residue of mythology, piety toward the dead or any rite becomes an empty mummery which the living enact for each other. The reverence manifests an attitude which no longer exists.

As far as the French Enlightenment is concerned, it tried to attack mythology in all its forms, even when incorporated in the most powerful institu-

tions of the day. However, there were certain points at which they wittingly or unwittingly compromised. Among these were the body of principles believed essential to the functioning of the commonwealth, i.e., ethical and sometimes religious truths. These basic moral laws, according to the great enlighteners, were engraved on the mind of man. As Voltaire said,

It is proven that nature alone instills in us useful ideas which precede all our reflections. . . . It is the same in morals. . . . God has given us a principle of universal Reason as he has given feathers to the birds or a fur to the bears; and this principle is so persevering that it subsists despite the passions which combat it, despite the tyrants who want to submerge it in blood, despite the imposters who want to destroy it through superstition.⁵

This principle of Reason expressed itself in the sentiments of justice and pity, which were, according to Voltaire, the basis of society.

Voltaire is not aware of the inconsistency between this doctrine and his other philosophical teachings. One does not with impunity embrace Locke's theory of knowledge and at the same time side with Leibniz when it comes to ethical truth. It is impossible to attack for long the awe of gods and demons and yet maintain reverence for the categories and principles of universal morality. This, however, is precisely the path which the philosophical founders of modern society, including Locke himself, tried to follow. Clearly it runs counter to the inner logic of enlightened thought itself. Scientific Reason, which uprooted the ideas of Plato no less efficiently than Plato undermined Homer's gods, is not in harmony with the doctrine of "native ideas" or any natural law or principle demanding respect as an eternal truth.

According to modern thinking, general concepts may figure in theories, providing they help us to predict and influence the course of events. This is how these concepts partake of truth, if such a thing at all exists. Science does not know any other meaning of this word. This also is the verdict of modern "philosophy of science," if we are permitted to speak roughly and without pretending to that precision which we admire in the formulations of this philosophy. The fact that so many thinkers of the last two or three centuries have tried to reconcile scientific thought with some kind of philosophical ethics and with the justification of certain social categories should not deceive us about the divergence of these two different endeavors. Philosophy, in terms of Voltaire's definition, namely as "the experiences of physics well observed, professions and industry," and philosophy in terms of the doctrine of "natural law" or any concepts such as "intuition" or "innate ideas" can only be combined artificially. The inherent tendency of the first conception of philosophy is to attack and destroy the second as being some kind of mythology, known today as metaphysics.

Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries metaphysics has been the attempt of representative thinkers to derive from Reason what in earlier days had come from revelation: the meaning and eternal maxims of human life. They tried to integrate theory and practice through intuition or dialectical insight. The more philosophical rationalism later on lost out to a nominalistic and empiricist epistemology, the more apparent became the weakness of the transition from the first to the second concept of philosophy, from the epistemological part of the respective system to the basic concepts of society. As far as Religion was concerned, the Epigoni of Enlightenment made a truce with it. The need for Faith was too imperative. Industrialist society put religion and science in two different drawers of its chromium filing cabinet. Metaphysics, however, during this rearrangement of the office, was thrown into the closet.

This process was not just intellectual. What we have outlined so far is merely one aspect of the economic and social development of this era: the streamlining of social life for the ruthless struggle for power over nature and man. In this fashion we may describe humanity's transition into the epoch of industrialism and mass culture. The consequences can hardly be exaggerated. By no means does industrial progress as expressed in intellectual enlightenment affect only such concepts as man, soul, freedom, justice, and humanity, which have a direct impact on moral and practical problems. It also concerns the meaning of the basic concepts of all philosophy, primarily the notions of concept, idea, judgment, and reason. All these terms are still used in everyday language as well as in scholarly works whether or not those who use them belong to the "philosophy of science" school. But there is no doctrine which would be in line with the modern development in technics and industry, and at the same time be able to supply these culturally decisive concepts with any adequate philosophical foundation or with any of the qualities that could inspire the reverence that was once given them. The respect which these principles today receive in speeches and treatises, and even in the hearts of people, should not lead us to overestimate their impregnability. They are undermined not only in scientific thought but in the public mind as well. Whereas Voltaire thought metaphysics was only for the *honnêtes gens*⁶ and too good for shoemakers and housemaids,⁷ for whom he wanted to preserve religion, we now see religion preserved for society in but a neutralized form, and metaphysical reason in disrepute even with what he called the "*canaille*".

The dwindling away of the philosophical substance, as it were, of all the decisive ideas in the face of the seemingly victorious Enlightenment, is one of the instances of the self-destructive trends of Reason. It is useless to differentiate here between individual Reason and Reason in social life, since the effects are felt in both of them and are brought about through a con-

tinuous and very delicate interaction of the various historical forces. As soon as our culture is put to a crucial test, we shall realize the extent of the destructive process which has taken place.

The concept of the individual, which in the history of Christian society results from the secularization of the idea of the eternal soul, shares the fate of all metaphysical categories. The entities to which these categories once referred lead a shadowy existence in the minds of men who still respond to their names if not to their meaning. However, such categories appear as completely irrational when confronted with the conceptual framework of modern science. The reverence which the modern scientist may exhibit with regard to them when they are used in a context other than that of his specific studies does not change the fact that the inner logic of science itself tends toward the idea of one truth which is completely opposed to the recognition of such entities as the soul and the individual.

The positivistic attempt to take refuge in a new kind of pluralism in order to maintain, in the face of scientific enlightenment, the moral and religious principles so necessary to the functioning of society, betrays the crisis in which society finds itself. Pluralism is the streamlined revival of the doctrine of "double truth" which, from the Averroists to Francis Bacon (that is, during the transition from the religious to the bourgeois idea of the individual), has played such a great role and now, at the decline of bourgeois individualism, is tried out again. Originally, double truth was invoked in order to permit science to emancipate the individual from dogmatic ideologies. Today, philosophy tries to keep science from emancipating society too energetically from even the secularized forms of such dogmas as the absolute value of the individual soul. But in the eager assurance of prominent representatives of science that it does not even so much as touch the conceptual framework of individualism, secular or theological, we notice a sign of bad conscience and despair. The times in which old and intelligent nations could shed their high humanistic culture overnight, as though it had been a dead skin, while science itself was worshiped and applied down to the last details of the murder factories, are still too fresh in our memories. Pluralism is a veil behind which the beliefs of the Western world, separated from the idea of binding truth, are fading away.

With regard to the individual, it is obvious that the ideological decay reflects the shrinkage of his economic and social basis. His rise and fall is deeply interconnected with the fate of middle-class property. The so-called transcendental factors which constitute the ego: memory and foresight, conceptual thinking, the integration of all experiences into one identical conscience knowing itself as the same in past and future, all these elements were tremendously enhanced by the economic situation of the independent producer and businessman. The enterprise, handed down in the family, forced him to think in terms which transcended by far his immediate needs,

even his own life span. He thought of himself as an autonomous subject on whom depended not only his own well-being but the prosperity of his family as well as that of his community and state. There was no agency which would tell him what to produce or where and what to buy and sell. He had to plan all by himself, to rely on his own farsighted calculations.

In our days, these operations tend to be taken over more and more by collective agencies. On the one hand, social strata whose members in earlier centuries were never given the opportunity to develop so much as the rudiments of individuality are now being transformed into kinds of miniature economic subjects. They develop an ego whose conscious material interests, despite all the information thrust upon it, does not extend beyond its own life span. As long as prosperity lasts in peace and war they can depend on their skill. The same goes for their children. On the other hand, the independent entrepreneur is supplanted by the director or manager. He acts on objectivized economic and political interests and must conform to powerful groups and collectivities. Thus the structure of the human mind at both poles of society becomes more and more alike. Today the trend is toward increasing adjustment and conformity, toward being a good member of associations, corporations, unions, and teams. As society assumes many of the coordinating functions which had been exercised with so much friction within the human being, man seems more and more able to get along with a shrunken ego and to do without that highly developed inner life which once defined the individual. That is why the concept of the individual itself has become a romanticism. Despite official ideology it seems to yield to the social trends reflected by modern enlightenment.

One might ask whether our thesis of the self-liquidation of reason in recent Western history is not one-sided. Are there not many philosophical and other public currents which are in contradiction to the general development to which we referred? Although there are naturally some important countertendencies, attempting to bolster the collapsing categories, most of the philosophical and religious attempts at artificial respiration of old metaphysical doctrines contribute, against their will, to the pragmatization and dissolution of the concepts they hope to revive. The direct or naive contact with any supposed eternal entities or principles, whether they belong to a pagan or an orthodox philosophy, has been disrupted by technological development. Through being used for the purpose of modern mass manipulation the antiquated dogmas lose, as it were, the last spark of genuine life. There is no intellectual way back. The more strongly the masses feel that the concepts which are to be revitalized have no real basis in today's social reality, the more can they be led to accept these concepts only by mass hypnosis and, once accepted, the more will they adhere to them with fanaticism and not with reason. Mythologies which at one time represented the level of development reached by humanity are now left behind

by the social process. Yet these same mythologies are often used by political factions which want to turn back the course of history. If these factions are victorious the masses must embrace their respective ideologies despite their incongruence with man's experience and skill in his industrial existence. The masses must force themselves into believing them. Truth is thus replaced by purpose and naive faith by boisterous allegiance. This is what we have witnessed so often in history and recently in Germany and other Fascist states.

The situation is similar when, instead of antiquated philosophies, new synthetic beliefs are to be instilled in the public mind. As long as they are not enforced by the state, they play the role of "mind cures" and fashions. However, as part of the manipulating machinery of any authoritarian government, they become commands, even more dehumanizing than those requiring abject outward behavior, for they dispossess man of his own conscience and make of him a mere agent of modern social trends. Each change in these synthetic beliefs, as decreed by the small group in power, however trifling in content, is accompanied by purges, by the destruction of human beings, intellectual potentialities, and works of art.

But if neither the revival of old nor the invention of new mythologies can check the course of Enlightenment, are we not thrown into a pessimistic attitude, a state of despair and nihilism? The answer to this critical objection is very simple but so seldom heard nowadays that the Sartrean version of existentialism appears to be quite revolutionary because it has assumed this attitude. The absence of a predetermined way out is certainly no argument against a line of thought. The resolution to follow the intrinsic logic of a subject regardless of the comforting or discomforting outcome is the prime condition of true theoretical thinking. As far as our situation today is concerned, there seems to be a kind of mortgage on any thinking, a self-imposed obligation to arrive at a cheerful conclusion. The compulsive effort to meet this obligation is one of the reasons why a positive conclusion is impossible. To free Reason from the fear of being called nihilistic might be one of the steps in its recovery. This secret fear might be at the bottom of Voltaire's inability to recognize the antagonism between the two concepts of philosophy, an inability contrary to the idea of Enlightenment itself. One might define the self-destructive tendency of Reason in its own conceptual realm as the positivistic dissolution of metaphysical concepts up to the concept of Reason itself. The philosophical task then is to insist on carrying the intellectual effort up to the full realization of the contradictions, resulting from this dissolution, between the various branches of culture and between culture and social reality, rather than to attempt to patch up the cracks in the edifice of our civilization by any falsely optimistic or harmonistic doctrine. Far from engaging in romanticism, as have so many eminent critics of Enlightenment, we should encourage Enlightenment to move forward even

in the face of its most paradoxical consequences. Otherwise the intellectual decay of society's most cherished ideals will take place confusedly in the undercurrents of the public mind. The course of history will be hazily experienced as inescapable fate. This experience will provide a new and dangerous myth to lurk behind the external assurances of official ideology. The hope of Reason lies in the emancipation from its own fear of despair.

NOTES

1. Plato, *Meno*, 81.

2. To overcome our blindness in the midst of all the brand-new facts on which we look, modern philosophers of the most antagonistic schools have tried to draft methodologies aimed at obtaining access again to what is undistorted and concrete. Through a conscious and methodical effort they wish to regain the preconceptual sphere of life, the point of departure for any delineating, determining activity of the mind. Reason is supposed to get hold of itself by finding its way back to that point from which it started its triumphal march toward objectivization and quantification. In this respect, Husserl's phenomenology, notwithstanding the discrepancies of the two doctrines, indeed agrees with that of Hegel. Here lies one of the most potent motives for the theory of knowledge as it originated in the later part of the nineteenth century, particularly in neo-Kantianism. Furthermore, Bergson's metaphysical effort to replace "mechanical memory" by what he calls "independent recollections" is aimed at a return from the reified world of science to concrete reality and thus make Mind conscious of itself. In his endeavor to "*briser le cercle du donné*" (*L'Évolution créative* [Paris], 210), to break the circle of the given, Bergson is not so far from Dewey's early effort to break through the walls of static intellectualistic concepts to genuine experience. The recent attempts to lay open the fundamental structure of existence, which, as it were, has been covered by the cloak of business and scientific language and mentality, express the same perplexity. All these philosophers feel that Reason, on the verge of losing itself to its various practical functions, must reflect upon its genesis in order to remain identical with truth.

3. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique, Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Molland [Paris, 1877–1885], 20:599.

4. *Ibid.*, 20:452.

5. *Ibid.*, 11:22–23.

6. *Ibid.*, 39:167.

7. *Ibid.*, 46:112.