

REASON AND ENCHANTMENT: A HUMANIST SPEAKS TO A POST-MODERN WORLD

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Note: This essay was prepared for a forthcoming volume, The Humanist Way, to be published by the Indian Radical Humanist Association for use in their December 1993 seminar. In the essay, I use references with which I am familiar—mainly western and modern and male. For this, I apologize. I hope that the reader—better instructed than I would find—ways of supplying the philosophic, literary, and aesthetic references, East and West, male and female, that I am incompetent to offer. From the little I do know of the world and its poetry, however, I know that we have at least as much in common as we have in our apartness and that while each of us lives in his/her own "village," we live in a "global village," too. In any event, the attack on Enlightenment values is real and is not unique to the West. To be sure, that attack seems most likely to come from religious fundamentalism and orthodoxy. The postmoderns, however, deliver that attack from the other side—so to speak. But, the circle closes, and as postmodern and orthodox meet each other, they will, I think, recognize each other as kindred spirits—joined not in faith but in their disdain for reason, democracy, and sci-

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ence and in their fragmentation of the human race. Against this, the Humanist must recover reason, often saving it from its friends as much as from its enemies.

I am a "white, middle class, western male," and I do not apologize for that. I am a Humanist, and I do not apologize for that, either. I was trained as a philosopher and in the liberal tradition. And, I am not convinced that these lead me, necessarily, in the pathways of error and evil. Now I do not deny that racism, male chauvinism, ethnocentrism, and other sins of "modernity" are intellectual and moral disasters. But, I didn't need the postmoderns to tell me this. An Enlightenment conscience long ago taught me to confront these disasters. Many of us liberal middle-class types, inspired by Enlightenment ideals, have been engaged personally, politically and intellectually over the years with just these issues. Nor do I deny the possibility of self-delusion which turns *my* position into *the* position, *my* world into *the* world. I understood Marx very well when he spoke of "false consciousness," or Weber when he spoke of "ideology." I didn't need the postmoderns for that, either. But, I deny that I am self-deluded-wouldn't anyone?-and insist that rationality, freedom and equality are both essential and universal values and that science and democracy are both essential and universal institutions. Yes, these are *my* values and visions, but they are confirmable beyond *my* subjectivity, *my* culture, *my* history. I retain, in other words, a sense of objectivity particularly since I have seen what a reasonless passion for "Race" and "Blood" and "Kultur" (always revealed by the use of upper-case letters) have done to us and are doing to us-holocaust, ethnic cleansing and religious wars. Having declared myself, therefore, let me in what follows take this paragraph apart (I, too, can "deconstruct"), particularly in the light of what is gen-

erally called the postmodern rejection of Enlightenment (Le., modern and Humanist) values.

I begin with a prejudice. The more I encounter the so-called "postmodems" (e.g., Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Rorty, Heidegger, et al.), the less I am taken with them. To begin with, their language-despite their pretentiousness about "words," "archeology" and "deconstruction"-is deliberately (or so it seems to me) designed to confuse and mislead. The disdain of reason, after all, reveals itself in how we speak, in our grammar and syntax. All too often, their "truth," if any (they deny the possibility, meaning, and/or notion of "truth" including their own), is masked by inordinately massive verbal surroundings which serve only to hide us from each other, to hide ideas from inquiries. There may be a discovery or two to be found in their views, but these remain hidden, too, deliberately hidden, I think. And, like the university sophomore who has come upon a new "discipline"-the first-year psychology student comes to mind-postmodern language conveys an impression of profundity, as if to speak "clearly and distinctly" (following Descartes, the arch-villain of reason and "foundationalism") could only be to speak superficially. This is all the more ironic since the postmodern claim is to strip away "metaphysics" -variously the "end" or "completion" of philosophy if Heidegger be believed-in order to return to "Being." The postmodern style boasts, instead, that it worships at the altar of myth, poetry and metaphor. That the country of Descartes, Voltaire and Rousseau should produce such linguistic escapades is sad; that the country of Goethe and Schiller should produce such linguistic obfuscations is funny. Most pathetic of all, the great pre-postmodern hero, Friedrich Nietzsche, was-whatever his madness-a genuine master of language, rhythm and metaphor. His descendants, or those who claim to be, are not.

If postmodern language displays a disrespect for persons and ideas, the notions that are conveyed-

when I conquer my impatience and dig for them-are more seriously doubtful. So, I must conquer my impatience if only because all too many of us, having despaired of the world and its problems, are beguiled by postmodernism and other fads like "new age" philosophy. In common, for all their differences, they fascinate by their disdain for the inherited world. They appeal to our distrust of the competence-or seeming competence-of that inheritance, repeating the familiar litany of failures of science, of technology, of democracy. We look to these fads-to just about anything-that promises a response to the terrors of our experience, desperate for any response.

Briefly, what is it that we hear? Universal claims of any and all sorts are at fault simply because they are universal, and so the Enlightenment with its grand dream of "all" persons is only false, at best a "local" event. This, I am told by the postmodernist, is rooted in the great error of "foundationalism," the arrogance of searching for a unifying and common notion or principle that can characterize literally everything. A counsel of humility, no doubt-as if events do not teach humility every day-but the postmodernist takes the matter beyond sensibility to ontology. Thus dismissed is the great revolutionary trinity-liberty, equality and fraternity-and the great physical imagery of space, time and movement. To be sure, in a pluriform world, a certain hesitation about universal claims is advisable as is a certain respect for differentiation and otherness. But, I did not need the postmodernists to tell me that I am "human, all too human," or to remind me of the imperfections of knowing.

We hear more. Scientific claims of truth, according to the postmodernist, are at best commonly held opinion-even social opinion-since science is, after all, only another cultural narrative, another metaphor. This is, of course, to confuse theory-creation with literature, insight with verification, and to ignore the history of the sciences-but that's all right, too, since we are also

told that history is but another metaphor and therefore suspect as well. The fact is that theory is always being challenged and that the challenge is not merely political idiosyncratic but ontological, arising from "what is." So, even a postmodern walks on the ground, breathes oxygen, drinks water, understands perspective and distance, distinguishes hard and soft, solid and liquid; that is, the postmodern encounters "what is" just like we more ordinary souls, and it is the "what is" that initiates, grounds and tests theory. Even a postmodern can hear a child in pain, see a man starving, a woman abused. Even a postmodern uses a printing press and a technical distribution system. The world-not *my* world-turns false theory out, just as "special creation" and "spontaneous generation" and "geocentrism" were turned out and not merely replaced-not merely one story following another as tastes change. And if the sciences have arrogated a monopoly of truth-or better, if scientists have been encouraged in their arrogance for political and mythic reasons-I did not need the postmoderns to tell me that truth is where you find it and where it finds you-and not always in a laboratory or formula. Yes, I know my Newton and Darwin. But, I have read my Hamlet, and I know my Freud and my Goethe, too-the truth of poetry and yes, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio."

Yet another postmodern notion: freedom is a Western moral idea so that if another culture wishes to keep its priests and shamans and head-men (note that it is mostly men that are referred to despite a postmodern nod to the feminine), why then, freedom is as good as slavery, only different, and as the French say, "*vive la difference.*" (Of course, the postmoderns-more pretension-spell it "differance.") The magic word is "community." But little is said about the differences between oppressive and liberating community, little is said about the community that grows persons and the community that defeats them. Community, in other words, is not

an end in itself and must come to judgment. But how shall we judge? Without foundations (criteria, standards), after all, any community is equivalent (morally, politically) to any other. Relativism runs wild. Thus, something serious is at stake, much more than a matter of taste or a troublesome rhetoric. And all the talk of "community" fails to address what is lost in that idolatry of difference.

The attack on principle, on science, on freedom coagulates around a disdain for reason which is known as "arid" reason. That this attack confuses reason, rationality, rationalism, and reasonableness is hardly noticed. Postmoderns here are in accord with those fundamentalists of reason who are merely dogmatists disguised as rationalists. Both buy into the reduction of reason to mere formalism, a mistake of major proportions. Of course, mathematics and logic are not to be sneered at, but these do not exhaust the ranges of rationality. It is as if Hegel (another western white male) had not already attacked and subverted a narrowed univocal reason. It is as if Bertrand Russell and Charles Peirce had not already opened the doorway to an enrichment of reasoning. It is as if Mill had not offered an experimental logic and Dewey a generous notion of inquiry. That the poet, too, is a devotee of reason is ignored-yet how would a poem be if its inner logic vanished and if it were merely an unconnected and unintended grab-bag of syllables and letters? For the postmodern, the dialectic of Apollo and Dionysus announced by Nietzsche is severed, and a warfare between reason and passion is declared. So, rationality is merely the ultimate Western male value, the ultimate Enlightenment value, the ultimate "modern" value, and as such is merely the figure of some local narrative, and a poor one at that, given the pretensions of reason and its failures.

Just at this point, the Humanist enters. I do not deny the chastening acid of criticism, earned criticism. I confess that reason has, alas, been permitted to de-

scend into rationalism. If reason has been arid, too many Humanists have made it so-the postmodern indictment is not invented out of whole cloth. I confess that the instruments of reason-dismissed as mere "instrumental rationality"-have been abused and have abused us: by permitting us to think of ends and values, dreams and hopes, as only arbitrary, as surd and absurd. So nature is, literally, de-valued, devoid of values, and we are left adrift in a cold and heartless ocean of reality. I confess, too, that the outcomes of reason have, as often as not, merely served the least desirable of us, the least desirable of our purposes like conquest and greed and ego. Yet, though I confess I will believe, there is wisdom even for the Humanist in the Roman notion of the "church of sinners."

"Two things," said Kant, "strike me with awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within." What, then, does this belief come to, this belief in reason in spite of its faultiness and its abuse? I consult my experience of reason, and what do I find? First, and above all, reason is a seductress. I am fascinated by the pathways along which I am led by her. I hunt the stars-not only as the lover, the romantic, in a still and darkened night-but in all the vast and wondrous array of space and time. I imagine moments of creation, massive release of energies and massive occurrence of event. I look within, led by reason to the "reasons of the heart," to the structures of give and get, stimulus and response, desire and joy. I look around, again fascination, at the varied movements and developments of the persons I encounter, the dance of their lives. They do this rather than that and I want to know why, need to know why. And all of this "blooming buzzing confusion" enters my grasp. Yes, all of this "is" but it also "means." I am driven to penetrate that meaning. I am empowered in my reason to grasp the world, to paint the world-picture over and over again, to unite and separate, to conjoin and distinguish, to connect and sever. And all of this. all this putting together and taking apart is the

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work of reason, the leading-out and leading-to of reason. And when all of this accrues in a vision, an intuition, a grasp-the world is this way or that, people are this way or that, I am this way or that-reason whispers, "enjoy, but hold a moment. Is this really the way it is?" And that next-question is also a fascination, a fascination of reasoning, another leading-out and leading-to.

Reason, you see, is a passion, not the only passion, to be sure. I do not reason for no reason. I have my desires, hopes, motives, dreams, ideals. . .I have my "reasons." And yet, I doubt, am anxious, am frustrated. So my "reasons" face my reason, must face my reason which, as with any passion, cannot be evaded. I want to know the security, the truthfulness, of my "reasons." It is not enough to feel secure, to feel sure. I have been disappointed often enough when my feeling-sure tumbled to ashes, when my feeling-secure turned dangerous. I want to be assured, so I am driven to reasoning. At times, of course, reason is uninvited, an intruder from within. I prefer to feel sure and resent my doubt, suppress my doubt. I enjoy my blindness-at least for a time and at least until time catches up with me. But even here-to reason, not to reason-I am embedded in passions, conflicted passions. At any rate, I am not a piece of machinery, and reason is not turned "on" or "off" at the touch of a switch.

Reason is corrosive, and that is its discomfort. Just when I am settled, the voices of reason are heard, insist on being heard. Comfort and discomfort are at play on the field of reason and I cannot rest. Perhaps this explains the disdain of reason, the anger at reason. It can be harsh about what is most dear. It is never easy to surrender a dream, to deny a love. Yet reason with its vocabulary of "truthful" and "false," of "coherent" and "incoherent," of "fitting" and "in-apt," asks me for just such surrender when dream and love and hope are falsified, incoherent. in-apt. Typically. I resist and grow all the stronger in my refusal to surrender, like the

child who shouts "I won't" the more insistent the parent becomes. And yet, with all my resistance, I cannot rest. Reason will not let me, my reason will not let me. Another next-question.

Finally, reason is recognition. I am witness to my reasoning; I am witness to yours as well. Indeed, we encounter each other in many ways as friends, allies, lovers but also as enemies and strangers. And yet, wherever I am, I find you in your reasoning. You become clear to me just insofar as you show your reasons. And I become clear to you. Reason expects me to reveal; expects you to reveal. It will not let us stay hidden, out of view. In that recognition is a form of transcendence of culture, of race, of gender, even of time. I catch you in hope and in fear, and I look for their generation in the world, for that is what I do when I reason. Behold, strangers are not strange at all. I reach you in your hope and fear out of mine. Of course, I can be in error but reason corrects-always the next-question: are you sure you've read it right?

In short, the Humanist knows-but too often forgets-that reason is the "life of reason," the living out of reason. Sadly, it is this forgetting that has invited reason's enemies to the table. Yet, before philosophy, before science, there was reason, there was the human being at work in his/her reason. But "before" is misleading-as if philosophy and science followed some more primitive origination. Reason is environmental before it is instrumental, biographical before it is technical. Embedded in the "lived-experience," reason identifies and contrasts that experience with those others that suppress, deny, ignore it. It is necessary, then, says the Humanist, not merely to uphold one ideal but to oppose others. It is possible for the "lived-experience" to be a destruction, a disaster. . .and just to the degree that the passion and acid of reason are denied, just to the degree that its seduction is ignored. Then wildness and anarchy are truly without bound. Then Dionysus, forgetting Apollo, leads only to mindless death.