

Disintegration of Reason

In the contemporary context disintegration can be seen from multiple perspectives: (1) Nomenclature – ‘reason’ used to be a catch-all term covering ways of thinking fitting with the Enlightenment ideal, i.e., scientific method and rational governance, as well as sound *reasons* for judgement and decision in particular cases and eliminating superstition. (Subject to the earlier division between ‘rationalism’ understood as argument from a priori truths and axioms to conclusions on the lines of mathematics, and empiricism – knowledge from experience. Reason and science from the Enlightenment onward brought those together). But now ‘rationality’ is the more usual term, especially in the psychological sense of rational thought and action, both as regards individual persons and societies or organisations. ‘Reason’ retains its application to specific reasons for beliefs or actions based upon (rational) beliefs. (2) The critique of ‘instrumental reason’ going back to Weber and the Frankfurt School (especially Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (1944)), who interpreted modernity as leaving values or ultimate aims outside the scope of reason which was left as a purely instrumental matter of calculating the best (or cheapest) way of achieving aims that need not have any rational basis at all. Weber had insisted that the sociologist should show the facts about his subjects without allowing his values to influence the analysis. (3) Although reason/rationality has retained

its connection with science – modified after the 18th century by incorporation of empiricism within scientific application of reason – reason could often turn out, for instance in psychoanalysis, to be limited to scientific study itself which might be study of *irrationality*. That has been compounded with the development of experimental psychology from the 1960s with studies appearing to show that humans are often very poor at reasoning. But the history of thinking, perhaps quite rationally, about feelings and thoughts, and therefore behaviour and speech, as influenced by unconscious processes goes back at least to the influence of Schopenhauer. He introduced educated Westerners to the notion of unconscious motivation as systematic. That, of course, did not detach reasoned thinking from science. Later in the 19th century Darwin developed the theory of emotions as guided by evolutionary forces, thus placing them within the purview of reason and science whether or not they were ‘rational’ in themselves. As Magee puts it in relation to Schopenhauer; ‘...a belief in the all-pervading presence and importance of irrational factors in the mental life of human beings is not in itself an irrational belief, nor is it any form of espousal of irrationality’.

4) However, some features of recent thinking include challenges to reason, either through casting doubt or explicit critique. Foucault’s ‘geneological’ (that is, tracing origins) method traced the beginnings of modern reason as defined against the notion of madness in the 17th century, leading to

institutionalisation of the insane. Gilles Deleuze in his *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, (1962) set Nietzsche against the models of Kant and Hegel. He proposed to think against reason in resistance to Kant's assertion of the self-justifying authority of reason alone. At the same time, subsequent and continuing experience of what irrational factors can mean in politics and society readily creates a great deal of fear, and sometimes even despair at the human condition. (Perhaps some of the current younger generation have forgotten that through lack of direct experience). In turn this links in with the issue of 'instrumental' rationality (reason) separated from any need for the guiding principles to be rational, or involving actual manipulation of irrational impulses.

Lately, the cognitive psychologists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber (2017) have tried to reestablish reason on a basis which takes account of modern psychology but still accords it a general importance not confined to a narrow role, if any at all. They observed that psychologists had, until the 1990s, taken little notice of evolution, natural selection, and *biological* function. The psychologists took for granted that the function of reason was to enhance individual cognition. They then concluded that reason was not performing as well as previously assumed. Mercier and Sperber proceeded from their evolutionary approach to argue that reason developed in the context of cooperation and communication (that is, socially), having 2 functions: (i)

Justification of oneself and evaluating the justifications of others, and (ii)

Argumentation – constructed to try to convince others and evaluating the arguments of others. These functions tie reason and reasoning in with an interactive setting, seen as the context in which reason developed.

Now, there is a sense in which Mercier and Sperber have reintroduced philosophy into analysis of reason by rethinking what reason is *for* (it has a social context), and then challenging the idea that ordinary people's reasoning is apt to be fallacious.

Faced with evidence that much ordinary reasoning is *not* governed by the rules of classical logic – that is, it is not 'monotonic' in the sense that if a conclusion follows from an initial set of premises, it also follows from any larger set of premises that includes the initial set, or, it leaves the conclusion open to change if new information comes available – some psychologists such as Mike Oaksford and Nick Chater suggested a probabilistic (specifically Bayesian) form for ordinary reasoning. However, Mercier and Sperber prefer an evolutionary and modularist view of inferential processes. 'Every inferential module aims at providing a specific kind of cognitive benefit, and at doing so in a cost-effective way. In this perspective, investigating a given module is a matter of relating its particular procedures to its particular function. The function of the reason module, in particular, is much more

specific than that of organising knowledge and decision making in general’.

(*The Enigma of Reason*, p.165).

As for classical logic, they claim it still has a place as not just a norm or procedure but also as a heuristic tool that clarifies questions and suggests answers. In their view this goes against the standard view that the function of logic is precisely to overcome limitations of heuristic thinking. (Their claim may indeed seem rather strange.)

In conclusion, we might find that if Mercier and Sperber prove successful with their project there would be less of a separation between rationality and popular emotions, intuitions, or indeed reasoning which rationality may study. That is, the divide between social science or psychology and their subjects would be less sharp than it has become ever since Schopenhauer. But it is more doubtful whether they have made any impact on the issue of instrumental reason (that is, rehabilitated Kant or the Ten Commandments!). Despite their arguing that reason is a universal feature of humans, they leave it as helping people to justify their values but not in any sense deciding them. Accordingly, they effectively accept the fact/value dichotomy in metaphysics without seeking a reconciliation from any other point of view.