

Discussion

DISTRUSTING REASON

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I

There is in Western cultures a widespread distrust of appeals to reason. The sources of this distrust are varied and I shall touch on only a few of them. It is sometimes said, with psychoanalytic thought in mind, that all reasons are really rationalizations, that rationality is really only a facade for what is at bottom irrational. Surely many people rationalize more of the time than we are usually wont to believe. Sometimes, when people offer what in fact turn out to be sound arguments, they are still rationalizing, because of their motivations. Though they have actually hit on a sound argument, they are still rationalizing, for they would hold the same view in any case, with or without good reasons, because of quite nonrational considerations; though, of course, to be rationalizing they would have to believe they had good reasons.

However, while this may be true, it remains the case that for it to be true there must be a distinction between reasons and rationalization, for nothing could even count as a 'rationalization' unless we understood what it would be like for an argument to be soundly expressive of human rationality. Without at least some understanding of what a diamond is we could not understand what it is for something to be a fake diamond. Similarly, without some understanding of what rationality is—without some understanding of the canons of reason—we could not even have the concept of rationalization. It is, like the concept of a counterfeit bill, utterly parasitical.

No psychoanalytical discoveries could erase that conceptual distinction, though they could show, what is no doubt true, that human beings rationalize more frequently and more deeply than most of us recognize. But this does not undermine the sense of appeals to reason—even though it should make us suspicious of *certain* appeals. Moreover, the very goals of psychoanalytic therapy can make sense only on the assumption that there are intelligible canons of rationality in accordance with which people can sometimes act.

However, this is not the only source of a rather pervasive distrust of appeals to reason. Two quotations, the first from two sociologists and the second from Nietzsche, will bring out another source of this distrust. The sociologists Turner and Killan remark that "in folk usage we tend to confuse rationality with the dictates of culture" (presumably a given culture). And Nietzsche remarks, "What-

ever lives long is gradually so saturated with reason that its irrational origins become improbable.” There is, of course, heavy irony in Nietzsche’s use of ‘reason’ here. He is giving us to understand that reason and rationality are, often at least, very cultural things, determined by a particular cultural background in a particular historical period and reinforced by that culture until they become—as dictates of ‘reason’—practically unquestionable. Canons of rationality get fixed in our language and the stream of cultural life until they are scarcely questionable. It is this which meshes with the comments of Turner and Killan, though Nietzsche adds that these culturally mediated norms of reason have irrational roots which we have, perhaps conveniently, lost sight of, so that they are now rather mysterious and often reified norms to which we appeal in our thinking and acting. There is no suggestion in the remark quoted from Nietzsche, as there is in Turner and Killan, that there are by contrast some genuine objective canons of reason in accordance with which we can justly reject the counterfeit variety found in our ‘folk usage’ (our ordinary language).

It is sometimes thought that reason is not only wanton—as the above remarks suggest—but that it has become a kind of pander. What is meant is that there has been a kind of comparative decline in our culture—most evidently in university circles—of what Mannheim called “the free floating intelligentsia.” That is to say, there are relatively fewer people who see themselves as, or who, even when they so view themselves, can effectively function as, critics of society. There has been and continues to be a decline of autonomous criticism directed at at least certain of the ideals, goals, and underlying assumptions of one’s society and not just at its effectiveness in carrying out goals whose underlying rationale is never seriously probed. University professors, for example, more and more see themselves simply as professionals without responsibilities beyond the confines of their disciplines or specialities. Reason (human intelligence and rationality) in such a vacuum and, oddly enough, by such an intelligentsia, is repeatedly used ideologically to justify, defend, and apologize for the status quo. As Noam Chomsky and Conor Cruse O’Brien have noted, “intellectuals”—informed “men of reason”—have repeatedly subordinated their critical faculties to the power structures about them.¹ They have put their intelligence out for hire to serve the self-defined goals of established society.

It is easy to understand a turning away from appeals to reason after witnessing such ideological employments of reason—a pandering use of expertise to serve unquestioned interests.

Increasingly, reason gives up (*a*) its critical function of challenging the norms and power structures of society and (*b*) its responsibility, as J. S. Mill advocated, to “methodize . . . knowledge . . . [and] to look at every separate part of it in its relation to the other parts, and to the whole. . . .”² We have come to

1. Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), and *For Reasons of State* (London: Fontana Books, 1973). See Conor Cruse O’Brien’s contribution to the volume edited by Max Black, *The Morality of Scholarship* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968).

2. J. S. Mill, quoted by Richard Lichtman in “The University: Mask for Privilege,” in *The University Crisis Reader*, vol. 1, ed. Immanuel Wallerstein and Paul Starr (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

have a strong sense, as Richard Lichtman has put it, of “rationality defeating its own humane requirements.”³ And this leads to a deep alienation and to a pervasive distrust of appeals to reason.

II

Some will say that this distrust of reason is just sentimentality or conceptual confusion or both. We must recognize that clear-headed intellectuals have seen through appeals to ideology. Total ideologies are irrational, and there is a nonideological conceptualization of reason that is perfectly appropriate and, when once understood, will make it evident that the above complaints against reason are pointless when taken as offering any rationale for a distrust of reason—a kind of using reason to generate a distrust of reason. When we are clear about what ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’ really mean, we will recognize that such negative reactions are senseless. First, we should contrast rationality sharply with intuition, sentiment, and even considered judgments. The rationale for the former contrast should be obvious though challengable all the same; but for the contrast with ‘considered judgments,’ we must recognize that to be realistic we should acknowledge that to operate with strict principles of rationality is to recognize that in no case are we justified in claiming that even a considered judgment is correct unless defended and maintained by reference to a regular method of computation. We need, as Bertrand Russell has put it, to come to understand that “‘reason’ has a perfectly clear and precise meaning. It signifies the choice of the right means to an end that you wish to achieve. It has nothing whatever to do with the choice of ends.”⁴ To think that reason can dictate or determine ends betrays, as Russell adds, a failure to have understood the concept of rationality. If we are careful about what we are saying when we speak of human rationality, we will limit ourselves to a concern to avoid contradictions and incoherencies and to take the most efficient means to achieve one’s ends. To reason is to calculate the best way to achieve one’s ends, ends which, in the very nature of the case, cannot, except metaphorically, be said to be either rational or irrational. To use Hume’s striking hyperbole, “Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions.”

This basic conceptualization of reason and rationality, to which, Russell claims, every man who attempts to be reasonable will fully subscribe, has, as a kind of corollary, the following thesis about rationality: a rational individual will be a prudent maximizer. That is to say, a rational human being will seek to get as much as possible of whatever it is that he wants; that is, he will make as great a claim as he prudently thinks he can on his own behalf. All acts and only those acts, which, on the available evidence, promise to maximize the agent’s expectable utility (his preferences) are, for the agent in question, acts which it is rational for him to do.⁵

3. Lichtman.

4. Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), p. vi. I have examined Russell’s arguments and related arguments in my “Appealing to Reason,” *Inquiry* 5 (1962): 65–84, and in my “Wanton Reason,” *Philosophical Studies* (Maynooth, Ireland) 12 (1963): 66–91.

5. Russell, p. vii.

The claims articulated above constitute the core of the received view of rationality in Western intellectual circles. It is even sometimes claimed that this received view is sufficiently determinate and unproblematic so that with it we can ascertain in various circumstances what are rational principles of action and what are moral principles of action. It is argued that if we stick with this essentially calculative, computational, technocratic conception of rationality—which after all, it is also claimed, is the only genuinely determinate and tough-minded one—we will have no need to be distrustful of reason.

This received view, which in one form or another has been widely accepted by philosophers and social scientists, is also now widely, and I believe justly, under attack. In their various ways Chomsky, Stuart Hampshire, Richard Norman, Jürgen Habermas, and Lichtman, among others, have all powerfully attacked it.⁶ I will try to extend and sharpen this criticism of this tenaciously held conception of rationality.

III

I shall start by returning to a controversy over this issue between Richard Brandt and myself.⁷ I do this because (1) Brandt states the received view in a clear and succinct manner and (2) he attempts to meet some of my earlier criticisms of that view, criticisms that are re-stated and clarified here.

Brandt claims that “the rational act is always the one that, on the evidence, promises to maximize the agent’s expectable utility.” I do not, of course, deny that sometimes, and indeed typically, the rational thing for someone to do is the one which he has good reason to believe will maximize his expectable utilities. I rather deny that this is *always* so; that is to say, I want to show that circumstances can, and no doubt do, arise in which an agent does act rationally, even when by so acting he does not maximize his expectable utility or even believe that he is maximizing his expectable utilities. Even if he does not want to do a certain thing he sometimes has reason to do so; and if he acts on those reasons when there are

6. See the books previously cited from Chomsky as well as his *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (London: Fontana Books, 1972); Stuart Hampshire, “Russell, Radicalism and Reason,” in *Philosophy and Political Action*, ed. Virginia Held, Kai Nielsen, and Charles Parsons (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 258–74, and *Morality and Pessimism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Richard Norman, *Reasons for Actions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), “On Seeing Things Differently,” *Radical Philosophy* 1 (January 1972): 6–13, and “Moral Philosophy without Morality,” *Radical Philosophy* 6 (Winter 1973): 2–7; Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), *Toward a Rational Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), and *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (London: Heinemann Ltd., 1974) (I refer here to English translations of Habermas’s books. His older and influential *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* still remains untranslated); Lichtman (n. 2 above).

7. Richard Brandt, “Rationality, Egoism, and Morality,” *Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 20 (November 9, 1972): 681–96; Kai Nielsen, “Ethical Egoism and Rational Action,” *Journal of Philosophy* 69, no. 20 (November 9, 1972): 698–700; Richard Brandt, “Replies to Gauthier and Nielsen,” read to the American Philosophical Association Annual Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, December 28, 1972; and Kai Nielsen, “Rationality and Egoism,” *Studi Internazionali di Filosofia* (1974), pp. 49–60.

no overriding countervailing reasons, as sometimes there are not, then he acts rationally even if in so acting he does not maximize his expectable utilities or, what is on the received conception of rationality the same thing, he does not act in accordance with his own interests.

Brandt and I both argue, as against both Rawls and Gauthier, that it may very well be the case that on some occasions the rational thing to do is not the moral thing to do. A man may, on occasion, override what he acknowledges is required of him from the moral point of view and remain rational for all of that. What I claim, as against Brandt, is that a man can be acting rationally even when he does not act to maximize his own expectable utilities.

I do this by way of utilizing putative counterexamples. Brandt, by careful consideration of one of them, attempts to show that it is only putative. What we first need to do is to give the disputed counterexample and then see if it is a genuine counterexample. Here Brandt and I are in the same ball game, for he agrees that the kind of arguments I employ from such counterexamples would stick if I could show them to be genuine counterexamples.

Suppose—to give the alleged counterexample—I am one of a small group of soldiers making a desperate retreat. It becomes clear that, if we are to succeed, one of us will have to sacrifice himself by holding back the enemy troops with a well-placed machine gun while our comrades continue to retreat. We deliberate together and decide that it is in the interests of everyone alike (taken collectively) for someone to do just that. Our selection procedure is to draw straws. I agree, recognizing that my chances are one in thirty of ending up with the machine gun. But, as it turns out, I happen to make the unlucky draw. If, in that situation, I think through the move which is in my own self-interest, the prudent move that will best serve my welfare by maximizing my expectable utility, I will recognize that living up to my agreement is not going to do any of those things, unless—and even then not clearly—it is the case that I have an extremely sensitive conscience. That is to say, for me and for most people, it would more likely maximize our individual (not collective) expectable utilities if we were to pretend to man the machine gun and then surrender, rather than go through with what we agreed to do and what the duty of fair play commits us to. But a man, fully understanding the consequences and knowing well his own wants and needs, who stood by his agreement on the grounds that justice and decency require it, could not, just on that account, rightly be said to be acting irrationally. Yet this is exactly what the Humean calculative model commits us to claiming, unless it can be shown that the man who sticks by his agreement must, everything considered, have preferred to—wanted to—do that (i.e., wanted to stick to his agreements). He might have, but it might also be the case that he simply did it because he believed that he ought to, not at all wanting to do it.

Brandt and I agree that a man might *not* be acting at all irrationally even if he didn't man the machine gun when that was the moral thing to do. We also agree that such a man can man the machine gun without being a rule worshipper. What Brandt is committed to, and what I question, is whether, if the man acts rationally in manning the machine gun, he must believe that doing so will maxim-

ize his expectable utilities. I want to say that he may be acting rationally in manning the machine gun even if he does *not* want (prefer) to. And this would be so even when he is vividly aware of the causes of his wants and the probable consequences which will obtain if what he wants comes to pass. He may desire to surrender while remaining convinced that he ought not to surrender, and if he acts in accordance with what he believes he ought to do, he need not be irrational. He indeed may be, but he need not be. Sometimes we enhance our own welfare by enhancing someone else's welfare as well. But this need not always be the case.

I develop this counterexample precisely because with it we have a case where (a) a man could voluntarily engage in an action which most probably would lead to his own death in circumstances in which he was in sound health (mental and physical) and (b) he could even be aware that the circumstances were so extreme that he could later live with himself even if he didn't stick by his promises and man the machine gun in the face of near certain death. Brandt must say that such a man is acting irrationally if he manned the machine gun, even though, everything considered, he did not want to and actually preferred to surrender and had all these considerations vividly and clearly before him. But I remain unconvinced that Brandt has given us any good grounds for believing that such a man must in so acting be acting irrationally. If Brandt replies that he just chooses to use the term 'rational' in such a way that such a man must, by definition, be acting irrationally, then I will answer that I see no reason why we should accept his *stipulations*.

If we use 'maximizing expectable utilities' as economists do, then it is not preposterous to believe that a man in manning the machine gun might maximize his expectable utilities. It might be the case that manning the machine gun is what on balance he wants (prefers) to do in that situation. He need not on this economist's conception enjoy it but he can still prefer it, and if he really does prefer it then (by definition) doing it maximizes his expectable utilities. That is to say, it could be the act, which, under the circumstances, he most wants to do. Moreover, we should remember that on Brandt's account we characterize the 'utility' of the agent in terms of the "intensity of his desire, at the time, for the various outcomes or features of the act itself." We need to be clear that it could be the case (empirically could be the case) that an agent could desire to man that machine gun—could want (prefer) to man the machine gun—even in the face of the near certainty of death. If that desire is more intense than any other desire at the time for any other outcome, then the agent (on Brandt's model) must act rationally in manning the gun. And, of course, he may act with such a motivation. But if, alternatively, in spite of—indeed in the face of—his preferences, he mans it because he thinks he ought to, he does not maximize his expectable utilities. But it does not follow, Brandt's thesis to the contrary notwithstanding, that his action is irrational. I am not denying, absurdly, that maximizing actions are ever rational; I am rather denying Brandt's claim—and Gauthier's and many others' as well—that *only* maximizing actions are rational.

However, it could be responded in turn that such an argument through counterexamples cannot be decisive, for Brandt can always reinterpret any case of a man in such a situation who voluntarily does what he believes (morally speak-

ing) he must, as a case of a man who does what on balance he most prefers to do. I think this is, at best, for the case I described and many like it, a thoroughly misleading and implausible way to talk unless 'prefer' is so eviscerated that it includes in its scope 'choose to do so because I believe I ought to,' in which case the received view has died the death of a thousand qualifications. I say 'died the death of a thousand qualifications' because we are not in such a circumstance actually talking about preferences or wants anymore but simply about *voluntary acts* or choosing. We either pointlessly change the meanings of terms and say something misleading or say something which is false.

Given the importance of the above claim and given the intransigence with which the received view is held, let me put what is essentially the same point in a different way. By a stipulative definition of 'wants,' whatever a man does voluntarily, he does—in this special sense of 'want'—because he wants to do it, otherwise the act would not be a voluntary one. Here 'I do it because I believe I ought' and 'I do it because I want to' no longer make or can make a significant contrast. But now, on such a broad construal of 'wants as the ultimate reasons for actions' or as the determiner of the rationality of actions, the central thesis of the received view becomes utterly trivial. It no longer tells us anything about the most fundamental reasons for actions; it only tells us that voluntary acts must indeed be voluntary and that sometimes 'wants' is used with a moral or normative force. It is true that this stipulation is not unrelated to an ordinary use of 'wants' where to speak of wants is to speak not only of what the agent likes, enjoys, or prefers but also sometimes of what he believes he should do—for example, "I want to look at those three exams again to make sure I have not graded them too harshly." Yet it is an extension of that into stipulation to claim that whatever one does voluntarily one does because one wants to. And with this stipulation the important conceptual and moral distinction between 'I do it because I ought' and 'I do it because I want to' gets lost.

Yet, given the possibility that we may be locked in dubious battle here, in what may be a trivial terminological dispute, let me turn to a distinct cluster of criticisms of this calculative, essentially Humean, conception of rationality.

The calculative claim is the claim that all and only those acts which on the available evidence promise to maximize the agent's expectable utilities (preferences) are rational acts. This means that if a person does not seek to get, when he also takes fully into account the difficulties in getting it, as much as possible—as much as he has sound grounds for expecting he can get—of whatever it is that he wants, he is not acting rationally. Furthermore, where failing to so act is a pervasive behavior pattern on his part, we cannot correctly say that he is a rational person. To be rational is to be such a prudent maximizer. Reason and rationality are essentially a matter of taking the most efficient means to achieve one's ends (to get what one wants), whatever those ends are. It is a calculative activity; it is not and cannot be concerned with the assessment of ultimate ends.

Yet it is also usually, and indeed understandably, a concern of those who defend this conception of rationality that their conception not be such that it commits them to a stipulative definition of 'rationality' but that it captures at least the core of the sense that concept actually has in human life.

I shall begin by arguing that it fares badly on this count. I shall first argue that, given the concept of rationality operative in human life, we can and do say that certain desires are irrational and we do not mean by this simply, or necessarily, that we have some other still *stronger* desire which is in conflict with those desires we wish to label irrational.

Though it is impossible on the received Humean position, it is the case that in ordinary life if a man in perfectly normal circumstances has no desire to preserve his health or life, he is thought to be irrational. I do not speak of a man with cancer or in despair about the prospects for human life or embroiled in neurotic entanglements or harmed deeply by others he loves and the like. I simply speak of a man in quite normal circumstances with, in a statistical sense, normal perceptions about life, except, of course, this strange indifference to his health and to whether he lives or dies. Actually with such a man we would look for what Kierkegaard would call some "hidden perturbation" which would provide a rationale for his attitudes and perhaps, depending on what it was, render his attitudes (desires) rational or at least less irrational. But if we could find none—not even the hint of one—we would not think his attitudes or desires rational or even, as we should on a Humean account, nonrational. We would *not* say, 'Since he doesn't want to live, his lack of concern with his health and life is not irrational.' Rather we would say that in such a circumstance not to want to live is inexplicable and irrational and we would speak of the whole resultant behavior pattern as irrational.

However, it may be thought that we should be a little more circumspect with the 'we.' Perhaps in reality we would not all speak with one voice like that, and in any event this example is not a flawless one, for perhaps it unwittingly reflects assumptions about the intrinsic value of life rooted in a religious tradition which is no longer defensible. I think that last claim involves a muddle, but, rather than argue that, let me go on with other examples to make it quite clear that it is not only such (perhaps) questionable examples which cut against the Humean model. Suppose a man with no discernible rationale or reason, except that he wants to, tells lies to every person he meets over six feet tall. On Humean grounds, if that is what he really wants to do, we cannot but say he is acting rationally. Indeed if he effectively maximizes his expectable utilities (his preferences), he is a paragon of rationality. But this is exactly what he is not on the concept of rationality alive in the stream of life. A man who so acts, acts irrationally; and such a desire is an irrational one. He, as we would put it colloquially, "has a thing" about people over six feet tall—indeed he has some crazy blik about them. And even if we cannot discover that he has some crazy (irrational) beliefs about them, such as that all people over six feet tall are out to kill him, just his *desire* to lie to them for no reason and with no relevant background beliefs is judged to be irrational. Indeed having that desire without having the "justifying" irrational beliefs is even more irrational than having it with them.

Similarly, and more distressingly, a man who desires to harm others as much as he can and who acts on these desires is said to be a sick man with irrational, insane desires. Even if he maximizes his expectable utilities we still do not count him sane and rational.

Such cases can be indefinitely multiplied. What they show, at a minimum, is

that the Humean and orthodox economists' conception of rationality is not a characterization of the actual concept of rationality embedded in our forms of life, and that if defenders of such a conception think they are elucidating, or even talking about and using, 'rationality' as it is used in most English linguistic environments, they are mistaken. (Similar points could be made about cognate terms in French, German, Swedish, and the like.) They are simply not using, talking about, or utilizing the concept of rationality we actually have.

If it is replied by such theorists that they are not concerned with that because the concept embedded in English and related languages is a normative one with (in many situations) strong moral connotations and they want a normatively neutral conception of rationality, the reply should in turn be: but why think that we could get such a characterization which would still give us an understanding of what we originally wanted to gain a better understanding of: to wit, what it is for a human being to act rationally, what a rational human life would be like, what it is for human beings to be reasonable in their relations to each other, and what a rational organization of society would look like. To think that such questions could ever be answered in a normatively neutral way is to exhibit a rather extensive naïveté.

If it is said instead that the received conception of rationality is to be accepted as a simplifying device of considerable value in economic theory, then this, for certain purposes, may be granted, if it is firmly recognized that, while this may spell out what it is for "economic man" to be rational, it says nothing decisive about what it is for actual human beings to be rational or to fail to be rational, or about what rational principles of action are. What we need to realize is that this allegedly tough-minded and realistic (economic) conceptualization of rationality will not dispel the pervasive distrust of reason extant in Western cultures. Indeed, in ways to which Horkheimer and Habermas have sensitized us, it is likely to enhance it. Where the received conception is in force as the only legitimate conception, the scope of reason is drastically reduced. Many things which could aptly be characterized and argued out in terms of rationality fall by the wayside, and an essentially computational technocratic sense of 'rationality' gets insinuated as rationality. Here we have ideology parading as realism. But on the other side we seem at least to get ideology too, for in the normatively nonneutral, context-sensitive conceptualizations of rationality, all the problems of conceptual relativism and ethnocentrism raise their ugly heads.⁸ Again we seem to have no nonideological conceptualization of rationality. To illustrate: certain American political leaders claim that the developing thrust of majority thinking in the United Nations is unreasonable. And, certainly, many of the diplomats in the United Nations would return the compliment. The use of 'unreasonable' here is highly ideological. But this is par for the course for such uses of language in such political contexts. In trying to understand human affairs and in seeking guidance for social action, we

8. See here Richard Norman, *Reasons for Actions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971); see, as well, Roger Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973). I have tried to show how Trigg has not reduced the problems turning around conceptual relativism in my "On the Diversity of Moral Beliefs," *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2, no. 3 (November 1974): 281-303.

want a nonideological conception of rationality which is also not so utterly formal as to be useless. But it is that that we do not seem to have. Is this because we have philosophized wrongly about rationality and failed to gain a perspicuous representation of what is involved, or is it because the concept of rationality is deeply and unavoidably ideological or at least essentially contested?

IV

Given the force of the above considerations, we seem at least to have undermined any reasonable appeal to what in the grand tradition running from Plato and Hegel was taken to be the power of reason rooted in an interest of reason. We find talk of what Horkheimer has called “objective reason” mystifying and even slightly embarrassing. What are we talking about when we speak of reason “as universal insight” or as “a structure inherent in reality that by itself calls for a specific mode of behaviour in each specific case. . . .”⁹ In the same vein, we balk at Habermas’s quite un-self-conscious willingness to speak, in discussing Hegel, of “the principle of reason” which “has entered into reality and has become objective.”¹⁰ I do not say that we could not de-mystify such philosophical constructions so that we could make something of them; but I do say that this has not been done, and that the de-mystifications of rationality that I have discussed critically above cut against continuing here in the manner of the grand tradition or of Horkheimer and Habermas.¹¹ Moreover, such a belief on my part is not a residue of what they would call positivism and what might better be called scientism; on the contrary, it is the very work of reflection itself—rightly championed by Habermas—which pushes us in that direction.

However, the dialectic of this matter takes another swing. At the beginning of the previous paragraph, I quite un-self-consciously and seemingly unproblematically employed the term ‘reasonable.’ But we surely need to ask in such a context how ‘reasonable appeal’ is to be construed and whether it is in such a context an essentially contested concept.

Given my arguments in the previous section, some of the considerations we raised at the beginning of this essay return like the repressed. The main thrust of my argument has been to question the adequacy of the received “economic” or “technological” model of rationality—the conception which has sometimes been called instrumental reason. However, I did not counter it with an alternative *theory* of rationality, but was content to assemble reminders to show that this received conception was not the conception of rationality embedded in our forms of life; but now we are reminded of the warnings of Nietzsche and our two sociologists against regarding what is hallowed by our form of life as inherently reasonable.

9. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 10–11.

10. Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, p. 185.

11. I do not mean to give to understand that Horkheimer and Habermas have done nothing to clarify the conception of reason in the grand tradition. Habermas in particular in his crucially central chap. 7 in *Theory and Practice* has made an impressive case for such an enriched conception of reason (what he calls substantive and committed reason). Yet, for all of that, it remains the case that such a conception of rationality is in need of explication.

Such a recognition is surely right, but the other side of the matter—the side to which Wittgenstein, Winch, and Cavell have sensitized us—is that there can be no “standing outside” our concept of rationality to see what rationality really is. Keeping this Wittgensteinian—and indeed Hegelian—insight in mind, we should recognize that the force of the received conception of instrumental reason is that it correctly represents something of considerable importance in our common concept; its weakness is that it ignores other key elements of our common concept of rationality—elements which appear at least not to mesh with it. (Without going into *what* they are here, the truth of this claim can be seen from the very fact of the counterexamples to such an account.)¹² What we need—and as yet do not have—is a full account of our concept of rationality and its workings in our various streams of life. When that is done with some adequacy, then we can know whether we need a *theory* of rationality and we can know something of the problems to which it, if indeed we need such a theory, should address itself.

Fundamentally, I am concerned about the reliability, scope, and function of reason as a guide in life. If my central arguments have been near to their mark, it is not the case, for any rational agent, that the object of his *rational* choice must be what he on good grounds regards, everything considered, as personally utility maximizing. Preferences need not have such a decisive role in deciding what is to count as a rational action. But if that is the case, are we not then back to an old problem of Kant’s and Fichte’s, recently resurrected by Habermas, about how pure reason can become practical? A developed understanding, as Habermas believes, of self-reflection may be the key here. Self-reflection, which is necessarily at once theoretical and practical, is, where successful, emancipatory. Where self-reflection succeeds, it issues in a liberation from illusions, and with this there occurs, in a quite inseparable manner, comprehension. (Perhaps Conrad and O’Neill are right in thinking that to believe that self-reflection can have such an issue is the greatest illusion of all, but at least emancipation is the rationale of such an activity. If it is always frustrated, then genuine self-reflection is an impossibility.) We need to recognize that the most fundamental interest of reason is the emancipatory interest. Where, if ever, this interest is successfully and systematically satisfied, so that many human beings would have identified and surmounted the major illusions of humanity, we could speak in an objective and nonideological way of the attainment of a rational society or even, if we want to sound rather Hegelian, of the realization of reason in history. Perhaps with such an achievement we would have given something like a de-mythologized reading of Horkheimer’s talk of objective reason as universal insight.¹³ The point is that with such conceptions, we have something both sufficiently determinate and sufficiently compelling to spur both the seeking of more perspicuous representations and to make the realization of such a rationality a goal in our lives.

However, in the reflective consideration of such matters, questions—indeed hedgehogish questions—reviving the distrust of reason return to torment our

12. In my “Principles of Rationality,” *Philosophical Papers* 3, no. 2 (October 1974): 55–89, I have attempted to give an account of some of the other elements of rationality.

13. Horkheimer, p. 10.

understanding and distress our consciousness: what is emancipation, what are the major illusions of humanity and how are we to identify them? Perhaps these notions, and with them an integrally linked conception of rationality, are all so essentially contested that there is no nonideologically distorted conception of them. If this is so, this means that these very notions are themselves mystifyingly ideological. To say in turn that the very recognition of this is emancipation is a barren and pointlessly paradoxical rejoinder.

This last section has been distressingly inconclusive and perhaps even unwittingly elusive. I wish that I saw better here the way to go. But perhaps I have indicated something of what we need try to achieve or, if these final ruminations have taken us down the garden path, something of what not to try to achieve or how not to rationalize our perplexities about the scope of reason.