

Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947)

Abstract

Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) was a philosopher and sociologist who helped found the famous Frankfurt School of critical theory and social research. In this selection, he points to one of the most important shifts in the history of knowledge in the West: the redefinition of reason from an objective force with universal significance to a subjective mental category of self-interested utility. That is to say, reason was no longer thought to supply truths and norms to which everyone was accountable; rather, it did little more than coordinate means and ends in the satisfaction of individual desires. This shift, to which many German thinkers contributed propulsive force, fundamentally reoriented not only German philosophy and critical theory but also social behavior, cultural attitudes, and politics by introducing purely relativistic modes of evaluation.

Source

Chapter 1

Means and Ends

When the ordinary man is asked to explain what is meant by the term reason, his reaction is almost always one of hesitation and embarrassment. It would be a mistake to interpret this as indicating wisdom too deep or thought too abstruse to be put into words. What it actually betrays is the feeling that there is nothing to inquire into, that the concept of reason is self-explanatory, that the question itself is superfluous. When pressed for an answer, the average man will say that reasonable things are things that are obviously useful, and that every reasonable man is supposed to be able to decide what is useful to him. Naturally the circumstances of each situation, as well as laws, customs, and traditions, should be taken into account. But the force that ultimately makes reasonable actions possible is the faculty of classification, inference, and deduction, no matter what the specific content – the abstract functioning of the thinking mechanism. This type of reason may be called subjective reason. It is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable. If it concerns itself at all with ends, it takes for granted that they too are reasonable in the subjective sense, i.e. that they serve the subject's interest in relation to self-preservation – be it that of the single individual, or of the community on whose maintenance that of the individual depends. The idea that an aim can be reasonable for its own sake – on the basis of virtues that insight reveals it to have in itself – without reference to some kind of subjective gain or advantage, is utterly alien to subjective reason, even where it rises above the consideration of immediate utilitarian values and devotes itself to reflections about the social order as a whole.

However naive or superficial this definition of reason may seem, it is an important symptom of a profound change of outlook that has taken place in Western thinking in the course of the last centuries. For a long time, a diametrically opposite view of reason was prevalent. This view asserted the existence of reason as a force not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world – in relations among human beings and between social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations. Great philosophical systems, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, scholasticism, and German idealism were founded on an objective theory of reason. It aimed at evolving a comprehensive system, or hierarchy, of all beings, including man and his aims. The degree of reasonableness of a man's life could be determined according to its harmony with this totality. Its objective structure, and not just man and his purposes, was to be the measuring rod for individual thoughts and actions. This concept of reason never precluded subjective reason, but regarded the latter as only a partial, limited

expression of a universal rationality from which criteria for all things and beings were derived. The emphasis was on ends rather than on means. The supreme endeavor of this kind of thinking was to reconcile the objective order of the 'reasonable,' as philosophy conceived it, with human existence, including self-interest and self-preservation. Plato, for instance, undertakes in his *Republic* to prove that he who lives in the light of objective reason also lives a successful and happy life. The theory of objective reason did not focus on the co-ordination of behavior and aim, but on concepts – however mythological they sound to us today – on the idea of the greatest good, on the problem of human destiny, and on the way of realization of ultimate goals.

There is a fundamental difference between this theory, according to which reason is a principle inherent in reality, and the doctrine that reason is a subjective faculty of the mind. According to the latter, the subject alone can genuinely have reason: if we say that an institution or any other reality is reasonable, we usually mean that men have organized it reasonably, that they have applied to it, in a more or less technical way, their logical, calculative capacity. Ultimately subjective reason proves to be the ability to calculate probabilities and thereby to coordinate the right means with a given end. This definition seems to be in harmony with the ideas of many outstanding philosophers, particularly of English thinkers since the days of John Locke. Of course, Locke did not overlook other mental functions that might fall into the same category, for example discernment and reflection. But these functions certainly contribute to the co-ordination of means and ends, which is, after all, the social concern of science and, in a way, the *raison d'être* of theory in the social process of production.

In the subjectivist view, when 'reason' is used to connote a thing or an idea rather than an act, it refers exclusively to the relation of such an object or concept to a purpose, not to the object or concept itself. It means that the thing or the idea is good for something else. There is no reasonable aim as such, and to discuss the superiority of one aim over another in terms of reason becomes meaningless. From the subjective approach, such a discussion is possible only if both aims serve a third and higher one, that is, if they are means, not ends.[1]

The relation between these two concepts of reason is not merely one of opposition. Historically, both the subjective and the objective aspect of reason have been present from the outset, and the predominance of the former over the latter was achieved in the course of a long process. Reason in its proper sense of *logos*, or ratio, has always been essentially related to the subject, his faculty of thinking. All the terms denoting it were once subjective expressions; thus the Greek term stems from λέγειν, 'to say,' denoting the subjective faculty of speech. The subjective faculty of thinking was the critical agent that dissolved superstition. But in denouncing mythology as false objectivity, i.e. as a creation of the subject, it had to use concepts that it recognized as adequate. Thus it always developed an objectivity of its own. In Platonism, the Pythagorean theory of numbers, which originated in astral mythology, was transformed into the theory of ideas that attempts to define the supreme content of thinking as an absolute objectivity ultimately beyond, though related to, the faculty of thinking. The present crisis of reason consists fundamentally in the fact that at a certain point thinking either became incapable of conceiving such objectivity at all or began to negate it as a delusion. This process was gradually extended to include the objective content of every rational concept. In the end, no particular reality can seem reasonable *per se*; all the basic concepts, emptied of their content, have come to be only formal shells. As reason is subjectivized, it also becomes formalized.[2]

The formalization of reason has far-reaching theoretical and practical implications. If the subjectivist view holds true, thinking cannot be of any help in determining the desirability of any goal in itself. The acceptability of ideals, the criteria for our actions and beliefs, the leading principles of ethics and politics, all our ultimate decisions are made to depend upon factors other than reason. They are supposed to be matters of choice and predilection, and it has become meaningless to speak of truth in making practical, moral, or esthetic decisions. 'A judgment of fact,'

says Russell,[3] one of the most objectivist thinkers among subjectivists, 'is capable of a property called "truth," which it has or does not have quite independently of what any one may think about it. ... But ... I see no property, analogous to "truth," that belongs or does not belong to an ethical judgment. This, it must be admitted, puts ethics in a different category from science.' However, Russell, more than others, is aware of the difficulties in which such a theory necessarily becomes involved. 'An inconsistent system may well contain less falsehood than a consistent one.'^[4] Despite his philosophy, which holds 'ultimate ethical values to be subjective,'^[5] he seems to differentiate between the objective moral qualities of human actions and our perception of them: 'What is horrible I will see as horrible.' He has the courage of inconsistency and thus, by disavowing certain aspects of his anti-dialectical logic, remains indeed a philosopher and a humanist at the same time. If he were to cling to his scientific theory consistently, he would have to admit that there are no horrible actions or inhuman conditions, and that the evil he sees is just an illusion.

According to such theories, thought serves any particular endeavor, good or bad. It is a tool of all actions of society, but it must not try to set the patterns of social and individual life, which are assumed to be set by other forces. In lay discussion as well as in scientific, reason has come to be commonly regarded as an intellectual faculty of coordination, the efficiency of which can be increased by methodical use and by the removal of any non-intellectual factors, such as conscious or unconscious emotions. Reason has never really directed social reality, but now reason has been so thoroughly purged of any specific trend or preference that it has finally renounced even the task of passing judgment on man's actions and way of life. Reason has turned them over for ultimate sanction to the conflicting interests to which our world actually seems abandoned.

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Having given up autonomy, reason has become an instrument. In the formalistic aspect of subjective reason, stressed by positivism, its unrelatedness to objective content is emphasized; in its instrumental aspect, stressed by pragmatism, its surrender to heteronomous contents is emphasized. Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion. Concepts have been reduced to summaries of the characteristics that several specimens have in common. By denoting a similarity, concepts eliminate the bother of enumerating qualities and thus serve better to organize the material of knowledge. They are thought of as mere abbreviations of the items to which they refer. Any use transcending auxiliary, technical summarization of factual data has been eliminated as a last trace of superstition. Concepts have become 'streamlined,' rationalized, labor-saving devices. It is as if thinking itself had been reduced to the level of industrial processes, subjected to a close schedule — in short, made part and parcel of production. Toynbee^[6] has described some of the consequences of this process for the writing of history. He speaks of the 'tendency for the potter to become the slave of his clay. ... In the world of action, we know that it is disastrous to treat animals or human beings as though they were stocks and stones. Why should we suppose this treatment to be any less mistaken in the world of ideas?'

The more ideas have become automatic, instrumentalized, the less does anybody see in them thoughts with a meaning of their own. They are considered things, machines. Language has been reduced to just another tool in the gigantic apparatus of production in modern society. Every sentence that is not equivalent to an operation in that apparatus appears to the layman just as meaningless as it is held to be by contemporary semanticists who imply that the purely symbolic and operational, that is, the purely senseless sentence, makes sense. Meaning is supplanted by function or effect in the world of things and events. In so far as words are not used obviously to calculate technically relevant probabilities or for other practical purposes, among which even relaxation is included, they are in danger of being suspect as sales talk of some kind, for truth is no end in itself.

In the era of relativism, when even children look upon ideas as advertisements or rationalizations, the very fear that language might still harbor mythological residues has endowed words with a new mythological character. True, ideas have been radically functionalized and language is considered a mere tool, be it for the storage and communication of the intellectual elements of production or for the guidance of the masses. At the same time, language takes its revenge, as it were, by reverting to its magic stage. As in the days of magic, each word is regarded as a dangerous force that might destroy society and for which the speaker must be held responsible. Correspondingly, the pursuit of truth, under social control, is curtailed. The difference between thinking and acting is held void. Thus every thought is regarded as an act; every reflection is a thesis, and every thesis is a watchword. Everyone is called on the carpet for what he says or does not say. Everything and everybody is classified and labeled. The quality of the human that precludes identifying the individual with a class is 'metaphysical' and has no place in empiricist epistemology. The pigeon-hole into which a man is shoved circumscribes his fate. As soon as a thought or a word becomes a tool, one can dispense with actually 'thinking' it, that is, with going through the logical acts involved in verbal formulation of it. As has been pointed out, often and correctly, the advantage of mathematics —the model of all neo-positivistic thinking — lies in just this 'intellectual economy.' Complicated logical operations are carried out without actual performance of all the intellectual acts upon which the mathematical and logical symbols are based. Such mechanization is indeed essential to the expansion of industry; but if it becomes the characteristic feature of minds, if reason itself is instrumentalized, it takes on a kind of materiality and blindness, becomes a fetish, a magic entity that is accepted rather than intellectually experienced.

What are the consequences of the formalization of reason? Justice, equality, happiness, tolerance, all the concepts that, as mentioned, were in preceding centuries supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason, have lost their intellectual roots. They are still aims and ends, but there is no rational agency authorized to appraise and link them to an objective reality. Endorsed by venerable historical documents, they may still enjoy a certain prestige, and some are contained in the supreme law of the greatest countries. Nevertheless, they lack any confirmation by reason in its modern sense. Who can say that any one of these ideals is more closely related to truth than its opposite? According to the philosophy of the average modern intellectual, there is only one authority, namely, science, conceived as the classification of facts and the calculation of probabilities. The statement that justice and freedom are better in themselves than injustice and oppression is scientifically unverifiable and useless. It has come to sound as meaningless in itself as would the statement that red is more beautiful than blue, or that an egg is better than milk.

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Deprived of its rational foundation, the democratic principle becomes exclusively dependent upon the so-called interests of the people, and these are functions of blind or all too conscious economic forces. They do not offer any guarantee against tyranny.^[7] In the period of the free market system, for instance, institutions based on the idea of human rights were accepted by many people as a good instrument for controlling the government and maintaining peace. But if the situation changes, if powerful economic groups find it useful to set up a dictatorship and abolish majority rule, no objection founded on reason can be opposed to their action. If they have a real chance of success, they would simply be foolish not to take it. The only consideration that could prevent them from doing so would be the possibility that their own interests would be endangered, and not concern over violation of truth, of reason. Once the philosophical foundation of democracy has collapsed, the statement that dictatorship is bad is rationally valid only for those who are not its beneficiaries, and there is no theoretical obstacle to the transformation of this statement into its opposite.

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NOTES

[1] The difference between this connotation of reason and the objectivistic conception resembles to a certain degree the difference between functional and substantial rationality as these words are used in the Max Weber school. Max Weber, however, adhered so definitely to the subjectivistic trend that he did not conceive of any rationality—not even a ‘substantial’ one by which man can discriminate one end from another. If our drives, intentions, and finally our ultimate decisions must *a priori* be irrational, substantial reason becomes an agency merely of correlation and is therefore itself essentially ‘functional.’ Although Weber’s own and his followers’ descriptions of the bureaucratization and monopolization of knowledge have illuminated much of the social aspect of the transition from objective to subjective reason (cf. particularly the analyses of Karl Mannheim in *Man and Society*, London, 1940), Max Weber’s pessimism with regard to the possibility of rational insight and action, as expressed in his philosophy (cf., e.g., ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf,’ in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen, 1922), is itself a stepping-stone in the renunciation of philosophy and science as regards their aspiration of defining man’s goal.

[2] The terms subjectivization and formalization, though in many respects not identical in meaning, will be used as practically equivalent throughout this book.

[3] ‘Reply to Criticisms,’ in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, Chicago, 1944, p. 723.

[4] *Ibid.* p. 720.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *A Study of History*, 2nd ed., London, 1935, vol. 1, p. 7.

[7] The anxiety of the editor of Tocqueville, in speaking of the negative aspects of the majority principle, was superfluous (cf. *Democracy in America*, New York, 1898, vol. I, pp. 334-5, note). The editor asserts that ‘it is only a figure of speech to say that the majority of the people makes the laws,’ and among other things reminds us that this is done in fact by their delegates. He could have added that if Tocqueville spoke of the tyranny of the majority, Jefferson, in a letter quoted by Tocqueville, spoke of ‘the tyranny of the legislatures,’ *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Definitive Edition*, Washington, D. C., 1905, vol. VII, p. 312. Jefferson was so suspicious of either department of government in a democracy, ‘whether legislative or executive,’ that he was opposed to maintenance of a standing army. Cf. *ibid.* p. 323.

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Recommended Citation: Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-161>> [April 27, 2024].