

Reason and its Limits in Two Revolutions



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At a recent meeting of a regional association of professors of political science, I attended a panel during which papers were presented on the vexing subject of the role of the judiciary in American politics. The status of the traditional family in the interpretation of Constitutional law was very much at stake in the discussion. Opinions of scholars on this panel represented quite a broad spectrum of political opinion (something one does not always see when academic professionals congregate). These opinions ranged from those inclined to attack the “imperial judiciary” for twisting the legacy of the Framers to those who praised the activism of the courts for their role in promoting individual rights and social justice. As the formal discussion ended, I made my way to a corner of the room where an earnest, even intense, yet still civil conversation continued among a few scholars. Soon the time came when it was necessary to clear the room for the next panel. As this spontaneous debate was breaking up, one of the advocates of an active, “progressive” role for the courts on behalf of rights and social justice ventured the following capsule of his position, which he clearly regarded as a kind of clincher: “All we are asking is that all laws have a *rational* purpose.”

My progressive colleague was indeed proposing a modest, minimal criterion, it might appear: for what could be more reasonable than to expect that all limitations on human freedom be justified in some way by reason? At one level, the term “reason” implies simply the human faculty of speech (*logos*), our capacity, as Aristotle said, to discuss serious matters in common, to deliberate publicly concerning what is advantageous and disadvantageous, good and bad, just and unjust. And yet, of course, a moment’s reflection suggests that everything depends on just how one understands “reason.” In particular, much depends on how we understand the proper scope and thus the necessary or prudent limits of reason. What is a *reasonable* understanding of reason? This question of the practical meaning of “reason” is the profound, and today profoundly, practically important question – even, I would say, the urgent question – of which my confidently progressive colleague was oblivious. He, like many citizens and politicians, and almost all intellectual and policy elites today, took for granted a certain understanding of “reason” which is in fact quite problematic. Until we learn to address the question of a properly practical conception of what is “rational,” we will not know what we are asking when we ask that laws, or restrictions on the “rights of individuals,” have a “rational” purpose. I propose first, today, a brief (if admittedly quite challenging) intellectual genealogy of the idea of reason in practice. Then I will show how a distinctively modern — and in my view eminently questionable — understanding of reason has played out in practice in the course of modern political revolutions, using the French Revolution as the first great prototype. Then I will propose certain features of the American Revolution and Founding as suggesting how we might today recover or develop a more sound and reasonable understanding of practical reason.

(It is fair to warn you that the first part – the high-speed tour of key moments in the history of the idea of reason – is the hardest. But if you can just follow my general direction, the key questions will come into clearer focus as I apply my analysis to historical events and to contemporary issues.)

What makes a purpose “rational”? Aristotle, the Founder of political science, drew a very important and very definite distinction between “practical” reason – the faculty that ought to guide us in ethical and political matters – and “theoretical” reason, the faculty appropriate to the study of unchanging

realities beyond human power. He argued that, in both realms, theoretical and practical, the purpose of human activities is the fulfillment of our natures as rational beings. We achieve happiness by becoming as fully as possible what we are, and we are rational beings. And so it seems that, for Aristotle, in a sense, reason *is* its own purpose.

On closer inspection, however, we see that Aristotle in no way endorses the simple autonomy or self-sufficiency of reason. This is not the place for a detailed review of Aristotle's understanding of practical reason; but let us pause to note what is "reasonable" in this understanding. Reason, he indicates, is always limited by insight into what is beyond reason. Theoretical reason is limited by what he understands to be the permanent structure of the cosmos, the order of the whole, a structure which reason cannot master or contain but only glimpse at the peak of its powers. Practical reason, for its part, is limited, most evidently, by an awareness of the superior dignity of theory itself, and thus by a sense that "man is not the best thing in the universe." And this limitation of the scope of reason appears again in the dependence of practical reason on the shared practices and understandings that constitute civil society. In this sense, reason for Aristotle is civic – ethical, social, and political – to its core. The reasonableness, even the modesty of Aristotle's understanding of practical reason is evident in his refusal even to attempt to build an ethical or political theory "from the ground up," from the materials of pure reason alone. Instead, Aristotle begins with the foundation already laid in shared civic understandings of justice, of virtue, and of the common good. He knows that he is not starting from pure theory with no presuppositions or "prejudices," but is trusting, articulating, and refining moral perceptions already woven into the fabric of an existing order. And he intends his ethical teaching only for those who have benefited from a good upbringing and are already virtuous. Reason cannot construct its own purposes from whole cloth. In this sense, one can say that, for Aristotle, virtue governs reason. Where ethics and politics are concerned, to give a rational account one must first be able to "see" clearly the phenomenon of virtue. And to *see* it, you must already *be* it.

What, then, would Aristotle say to our political scientist's demand that all law be justified by reason? Indeed so, he would say: a reasonable law is one that contributes directly or indirectly to making men morally good and therefore happy, to educating citizens in virtue. For virtue is a precondition of sound reasoning.

This outline of some central themes in ancient Greek philosophy may appear remote from critical contemporary issues such as those surrounding law, the state, and the family – issues that divided my political science colleagues at our recent meeting. But I believe this backdrop is essential to discerning the powerful philosophical frameworks that shape contemporary movements and debates. An appreciation of alternative understandings of "reason" can reveal to us what I might call the "plate tectonics" of contemporary political and ethical forces, the deep structural dynamics of our common lives.

In order, therefore, to understand what is at stake in contemporary claims to justify law by the standard of "reason," to bind civic understandings of law to purposes that qualify as "rational," we must appreciate a transformation, a revolution in the very conception of "reason" that was introduced almost four hundred years ago (at the latest). Before we begin to describe this revolutionary transformation, it is important to note, though, that however powerful it has been both

intellectually and politically, its success has never been total. The modern “project” I will attempt briefly to outline cannot account for everything that happens in what we understand to be the “modern age.” To exploit my geological metaphor just a little further, we might say that the modern continental plate has tended steadily to rise over the traditional plate, sometimes incrementally, sometimes in momentous earthquakes marked by political and social revolution. But this process is far from complete, and the continent of tradition endures and retains a certain integrity – indeed, one could argue that it continues to underlie and to support the modern practices beneath which it is sinking (“subducting”). Thus, political and ethical existence in the “modern age,” speaking chronologically, stands on a foundation that is by no means simply modern but is mixed or composite in a philosophical and spiritual sense. And so further earthquakes or revolutions are always possible – and aftershocks and tremors perhaps inevitable.

Let us, then, scroll forward almost two thousand years from Aristotle’s ancient Greece to the early modern Europe of Rene Descartes, widely regarded as the founder – or at least a founder – of modern philosophy. The distinctively modern project begins with the attempt to liberate reason from anything thought to limit or constrain it. This is the modern revolution philosophy that precedes and prepares modern political revolutions (about which, more, shortly). Thus, Descartes famously begins his re-invention of philosophy by a wholesale rejection of all past learning, philosophical and theological. A radical methodological skepticism sweeps away all inherited insight, it annihilates all merely implicit knowledge woven into the fabric of society. What counts as rational henceforth is only what can be generated from the sovereign powers of the human mind itself. “I think, therefore I am” — the self-assertion of the human spirit becomes the touchstone of all meaning and all reality.

This deep reconstitution of “reason” profoundly alters both theoretical and practical dimensions of rationality and thus the relation between the two. On the one hand, Descartes liberates theoretical reason from its earlier subordination to religiously-tainted beliefs in the permanent and purposive structure of the cosmos; it thus becomes modern mathematical and experimental science. It has no inherent purpose, but may be considered a comprehensive tool for what Descartes, following Francis Bacon, calls “the mastery and possession of nature for the relief of man’s condition” – that is, man’s *material* condition. Practical reason, on the other hand, is liberated from its subordination to virtue, its dependence upon shared civic understandings of justice and the common good. In fact Aristotle’s delicate distinction between theoretical and practical reason is abolished along with all permanent limits on the power of reason. Theory is no longer the serene contemplation of eternal truths, but is rather the practical science of the mastery of nature, the prototype of modern technological science. Practice, for its part, is no longer governed by an implicit sense of higher purpose, by shared understandings of virtue, but must look to scientific rationality for direction. But modern science is defined by the rejection of the question of ultimate purpose, the question of the good, and so this question must always be deferred to some ever later stage in the progress of modernity. As Pierre Manent has brilliantly explained (*The City of Man*), modern thought focuses human energies on purely human purposes (rejecting the earlier authority of nature or of God). But at the same time it fails, or rather it necessarily refuses to ask the critical question, what is a human being? Or, what makes human life good? Modern power is in principle unlimited, but it has deprived itself of purpose, and thus of any compass. We should not be surprised, then, when power tends to become its own purpose, or when it tends to be destructive of concrete human goods not authorized by this “pure” modern reason.

To summarize the transformation effected by the modern revolution in the very meaning of rationality: in a sense, theoretical and practical reason have collapsed into each other: theory is freed from all cosmological or theological reverence, but is at the same time harnessed to the practical needs of humanity. And practice no longer governs itself but is given over to the direction of technological science – which itself tends to have no guiding purpose but power. The cost of the radical autonomy of reason thus seems to be the subjection of reason to an impersonal power.

But let us resist for now the urge to explore these modern paradoxes any further. The essential, for our present purposes, can be stated fairly simply: Reason has claimed autonomy and has thrown off all limits, natural or divine. By claiming autonomy, Reason, one might say, has become comprehensively “practical,” but has ceased to be reasonable.

This outline of the “plate tectonics” underlying modern questions of the rationality of law is necessarily quite abstract; it calls, then, for example and illustration – and, fortunately, these are ready at hand. For modern political and social revolutions, beginning with the French Revolution, bear all the marks of philosophical revolution I have just described. Of course there are many features of the revolution of 1789 that would have to be explained by various particulars of the history leading up to that revolution, and to the accidents and imponderables that always mark human affairs. Still, what one might call the logic of modern revolution, or the revolutionary logic of the modern project, is plainly visible: by abandoning the reasonable limits of reason, modern man greatly increases human power but at the same time risks subjecting his very humanity to the purposeless, impersonal power thus unleashed. The dynamics of the modern philosophical revolution thus provide the paradigm for various attempts, beginning with that of the French radicals (the “Jacobins”) to refound society on a new, autonomous idea of reason. The promise of a radical liberation issues into the rise of a new and inhuman power.

To trace the logic of a radically modern idea of reason in the French Revolution, we should begin by observing that in many respects the political ideas appealed to by the leading actors in this revolution appear to be close kin of the leading ideas of the American Revolution and Founding periods, the essential notions of classical liberalism: individual rights are understood to be prior to the authority of government, and the consent of the governed is held to be the basis of legitimate political authority. The link with the modern idea of reason (as set forth earlier as represented in the philosophy of Descartes) is the following: modern liberalism, as set forth most notably in the philosophy of John Locke, is in a way Cartesianism for everyman. In its pure form, the modern doctrine of the free individual in the state of nature conceives the human being in perfect abstraction from all bonds of nature, religion, or authoritative community. Every individual is invited to replicate Descartes’ radical break with the past; the purely modern individual dismisses all existing authority in order to assert his absolute self-ownership. All authority must then be reconceived as a pure construction issuing from the sovereignty of such a self-constituting individual. Authority has no external source in God or in Nature – it is a pure convention; it must be made. It follows that there is no sanction for law beyond human power, and no possibility of appeal beyond pure human sovereignty.

This logic leading from radical individuality to absolute state sovereignty is set forth plainly in the work of the most eminent philosophical patron of the French Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

But it can also be traced quite clearly in the very speeches and documents of the Revolution itself, most notably the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. This document at first glance appears to follow closely the principles of the American Declaration of Independence that preceded it by some thirteen years. The first article of the French declaration proclaims that human beings are born free and equal in rights; the second makes the goal of political association the preservation of these rights, including liberty and property. On closer inspection, however, we begin to sense that these apparently individualistic themes are embedded in a framework quite foreign to that implicit in the American statement. To discern this framework it suffices to be alert to the necessity somehow of finding a principle by which to limit the pure individualism that has been posited. We have not far to look for this principle; thus we notice the claim in Article Three that “the principle of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation.” And in the following articles we read that the limits of rights “can only be determined by law,” (Article Four), and that “Law is the expression of the general will...” (Article Six) — a Rousseauian expression indicating the absoluteness of collective authority. In the last analysis, the People or Nation, a collective entity, must be regarded as absolutely superior to the individual, for the rights of the individual are in fact determined by Law, the voice of the General Will. The individual can appeal to no authority higher than that of actual statutes legislated by “all the citizens or their representatives.” (Article Six) In the French formulation of the deduction of public power from individual rights, I conclude, the effectual truth of individual sovereignty is the collective sovereignty of the people, which in turn is understood as the sovereignty of legislative power. Extreme individualism requires the solution of extreme collectivism or statism. It is because the individual has been stripped of all higher loyalties and purposes that he can and must be reconstituted as a member of a collective sovereignty.

The indeterminacy and malleability of the pure, modern “individual” reveal their dangers more fully in the period of the French Revolution known as the “Terror” of 1793-1794. Here the passion for a “regeneration” of mankind revealed its frightening potential in a way that clearly foreshadowed the vast destructiveness of totalitarian ideologies in the twentieth century. The promise of a quasi-religious “regeneration” of humanity actually figured prominently already in earlier, ostensibly more moderate phases of the revolution, though its full potential would only become clear under the reign of Robespierre and his Jacobin faction. To understand the appeal of this promise, we can refer back once again to the logic of modern rationalism outlined above. The liberation of humanity from the bonds of divine or natural authority as traditionally understood strips human beings of all links to a higher purpose. “Reason” understood as directed towards this liberation has a content that can only be defined negatively, that is, in terms of the destruction of all traditional notions of purpose that might limit human sovereignty. For this reason, as we have seen, in modern rationalism, the question of purpose must always be deferred. The process of “Revolution,” of the ongoing destruction of traditional anchors of human self-understanding, then tends to take on a life of its own, and Terror becomes, as Robespierre proclaimed, “the order of the day.” It was thus under the banner of the vague concept of “regeneration” that the French Revolution in fact tended to become a limitless destructive process without any definable purpose or end.

The elusiveness of the promise of regeneration, the absolute and therefore ever-receding character of the end that justifies the pains of the revolution, produces successive phases of radicalization. To acknowledge the impossibility of humanity’s autosalvation would be to forsake the revolution altogether; the only possible response to the inevitable failure to regenerate is thus to concentrate the

power of the revolution by designating ever more enemies to be blamed and punished.

Thus, the distinctive features of the Terror issue from a fundamental commitment to the regeneration of humanity by human means, a commitment that fills the vacuum left by the negation of all goods understood to transcend human power. The individual whose rights are espoused by the modern revolutionary activist is not any concrete human being, with his particular set of beliefs and attachments, but an abstract and liberated individual who does not yet exist, but who must be created, at whatever cost, by the destructive work of an elite few, a vanguard party.

I have tried to show a direct link between the modern conception of reason as formulated by Rene Descartes and the blind destructiveness of the modern, radical idea of Revolution espoused by the Jacobins, and later by Leninist and other revolutionary parties of the twentieth century. Just as Descartes proposed to jettison the insights of tradition and to found philosophy anew on the basis of the self-affirmation of his own mind, so the French Revolutionaries proposed to create a new humanity and to throw over 1,792 years of the Christian calendar and to inaugurate a new age of reason in the year 1 of the new age.

Still, one might think that the age of revolutionary ideology ended for all practical purposes with the collapse of international communism. Certainly it is not my intention to identify any major party or movement tendency in American politics today with the ruthless fanaticism of Jacobins or Leninists. And yet, if my analysis is correct, the logic of modern rationalism *in its pure form* appears to bear a necessary connection with the subordination of human dignity to an increasingly abstract and impersonal collective power. The apparently modest demand of modern liberalism that all law and policy be justified before the bar of reason seems to employ or to presuppose an understanding of reason that cannot generate positive moral contents from itself and that is inherently at odds with all traditional articulations of distinctively human purposes. Modern reason can only be moderated or rendered reasonable as it were from the outside, by falling back on habits or traditions or implicit understandings for which it cannot account, and towards which it is in principle hostile. The reasonableness of modern reason is thus inherently a fragile quality.

To conclude I must briefly suggest how certain features of the American Revolution and Founding, when contrasted with the French Revolution, point to a more inherently reasonable conception of practical reason. There is no better guide to this question than Alexis de Tocqueville, who observes that the Americans were born free, and thus did not have to struggle to become free. By this he means that by the time of their Revolution or War of Independence the Americans had already benefited from a long colonial experience with the institutions and responsibilities of free self-government. Tocqueville admired the ongoing cultivation of local liberties, best represented by the New England township, that flourished under the complex articulation of powers characteristic of American federalism. The understanding of Christianity that Americans had inherited (most notably from the Puritan founders of New England) and developed was, moreover, one that allowed the remarkable confluence of what Tocqueville calls “the spirit of religion,” with the “spirit of freedom,” motives that were understood by leading European thinkers to be fundamentally at odds. In a word, when Americans rose up to defend and then to institutionalize their freedoms, they may have had recourse to the same vocabulary of abstract individualism as many of their French counterparts, but their concrete experience with self-government meant that they were in fact defending real and

definite practices and institutions, an actual shared way of life and not an infinitely malleable abstraction. Thus, the American claim to inalienable rights, as recorded in the Declaration of Independence, is set within a framework defined by “the laws of nature and of nature’s God.” Human rights are not, at the deepest level, simply human assertions to be sanctioned by human power alone, but claims of moral beings whose experience in responsible self-government is tied to a shared, civically-grounded sense of living within a morally-ordered universe.

If Americans succeeded – at least until recently – in doing without a theory of unitary sovereignty, it is not, as a number of French revolutionary theorists claimed, due to a lack of theoretical insight, but because they share an understanding, implicit or explicit, that individual rights must be grounded in a higher authority and thus oriented towards higher purposes. The rule of law in America has traditionally not been reducible to the sovereignty of the legislative power (as in France), or of the judicial power, as many Americans, including a number of Supreme Court Justices, now seem to assume. Rather, it has been grounded in a largely implicit higher law tradition that elevates the people’s Constitution above the mere will of the people.

Thus I would argue that the understanding of “nature” and thus of “reason” to which the first Americans appealed was considerably richer, more subtle, and more informed by concrete experience than the cognate notions that drove the destructive dynamics of the French Revolution.

Such a rich and subtle understanding of “reason” was available to Americans of the Founding period, and to their heirs for many generations, in the widely shared ethical and religious frameworks of their day. If we today are to preserve or recover such an understanding, friendly to the real human goods of family and community, we can no longer take such frameworks for granted. Nor can we call upon philosophers or intellectuals simply to construct them or even to deduce them from plainly demonstrable premises. Aristotle’s point still holds true today: the most important goods can only be known by first being lived. But a philosophy open to goods it cannot create can perhaps help by exposing the emptiness and blindness of modern rationalism, by debunking its hidden and seductive claim to guide us towards some unnamable liberation from the limits of the human condition.