

Some Effects of Reason Worship

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In our last paper we noted the change in men's ideas of the world and their own place in it, which has resulted from the increased mental activity of the last four hundred years; and we saw how the splendid conquests of human thinking-power have led to excessive and superstitious reverence for that one faculty. Excessive, because it contemptuously excludes the rest (the greater part) of men's nature; superstitious, because it erects reason into a sort of internal Mumbo Jumbo—mysteriously capable of comprehending, molding, and controlling the will, feeling and action of the whole human being and the whole society.

But what, we may be asked, have the extravagant theories of a few philosophers and scientists to do with the common life of every day! What have they to do with the masses, absorbed with the bitter struggle for bread, with the people who have barely heard the thinkers' names much less troubled their heads with their theories?

This. The conscious thinkers of every age are but the mouthpieces of its unconscious and half-conscious yearnings, experiences and aspirations. They are bound up with the social life of their time. They are inspired—whether they know it or not—by its needs, its strivings. They only give back, in clear and definite shape, what the many are vaguely feeling and thinking. And the ideas, thus formulated by the most powerful and active minds in the community, not only influence the belief and conduct of the few who come into direct contact with them, but filter back through the whole people to take their place among the current coin of popular morality and popular thought. The history of the evolution theory affords a notable illustration Darwin and Wallace, both at the same time but unknown to one another, were inspired by the general thought tendency to work out the hypothesis of natural selection. And again, it is a matter of common observation, how profoundly the ideas of Darwin and Wallace have colored the beliefs and influenced the conduct of millions of men and women who have never read a line of their writings.

Thus, not only the minds and conduct of a few philosophers or of the educated minority, but the common thought and common action of Europe have been deeply influenced by reason-worship. There has been a general tendency to believe vaguely that reason is a specially human faculty separating men by a sharp line of division from other animals; that it is closely connected, if not one with the "soul" or "divine" element in man; that individuals are deserving of respect in proportion to their possession of this one special faculty; and that we might deliver ourselves from the evils of life, the pain which nature inflicts on us, the pain which we inflict on ourselves

and on each other, if only we all reasoned logically or could be forced to submit to those who do. Hence diverse results, both useful and injurious.

In the first place, much of the blind faith that was once pinned to supposed revelations from on high has been transferred to logical abstractions spun out from our own brains, as a spider spins a web from its body. If the original material is an impression arising from some genuine piece of human experience, and the spinning process is without a flaw, then it is too often supposed that the web of abstract theory must represent human relations and conditions in general as they really exist, and can therefore be forthwith applied wholesale in practical life. Whereas, as a matter of fact, each generalization covers such a tiny portion of reality that it can be useful only as a practical guide to thought and conduct in a small part of that small part of our life that is conscious, and then only for those special minds to which it commends itself.

And yet the rashest and most partial of such generalizations are continually being forced upon society as universal solutions of practical difficulties. In morals, in economics, in politics, in the administration of justice, in social affairs generally, the fanatical believers in logical abstraction are prepared to govern the functions and treat the diseases of the body politic in callous disregard of all that lies outside the narrow limits of their pet theories. Just as Harvey's earliest disciples, under the influence of their enthusiasm for his theory of the circulation of the blood, were prepared to treat all human diseases as the disarrangement of a hydraulic machine! What matters if the heart and flesh of living men cry out against being crushed into the theoretical dolls' house! The theorist will persist if he can; and, as far as his power extends, ruthlessly cripple the lives of his fellow mortals in the name of "the greatest good of the greatest number," or whatever else is the formula of his sect.

Take the Charity Organization Society as a small instance of such attempts to enforce a cut and dried theory in social relations- The society was formed by humane and earnest men and women to relieve the poverty of their poorer brethren on logical principles. The theory was based on some most valuable generalizations from experience, the extreme importance to the individual of forethought, self-restraint, self-reliance, and self-respect, and the injury to social relations of all that weakens these virtues. Armed with the power of the property owner over the propertyless worker, these "practical" theorists crushed down the warmer promptings of their own human feelings, and set out with the honest intention of effectually relieving our social wretchedness with their "scientific charity." And now they stand aghast to find the social wretchedness as before, and themselves a hissing and a by-word to the very people they most hoped to benefit. The flimsy unity of their narrow theory has been burst by the pressure of the vast realities of the great world beyond. And still some of the theorists are ready to despair rather of men and nature than of their own reasoning!

The same sour fruit of abstract reasoning is plucked in our big orphanages and public schools, where boys and girls are brought up on scientific "principles" as numbered mechanisms. Their minds crammed with information, their hearts starved and perverted, their wills weakened or crushed, their impulses and instincts undeveloped and untrained.

Or, again, in our model prisons, where with the theoretical intention to provide the most healthy necessary conditions of life for the "average man" (the average man is a non-existent abstraction, and, moreover, a criminal is almost always a specially abnormal man), the theorists who meant to place the erring in the most favorable physical conditions for repentance and amendment, have done nothing but subject men and women to a system of barbarous petty torture.

The same is true of our whole penal system, of our legal system, of the whole series of arbitrary arrangements, which in the name of abstract right and logical necessity, ride roughshod over human nature, and permit individuals or groups to experiment on the luckless humans in their power as a gardener on his plants.

The disproportionate reverence for reason which checks men in revolting against the tyranny of theories and theory-mongers, leads also to a disproportionate respect for brain work as compared with muscular work. Brain-workers have withdrawn themselves into a class apart. They have considered the every-day necessary toil of other men as beneath their notice, and despised the doers of it. They have held themselves rightful lords of the "ignorant multitude," and ranked their brethren as beasts of burden, fit only to labor beneath the control of the enlightened. Reason worship has been the intellectual side of capitalism. The exaggerated proportion assigned to intellect in estimating the human being, has given a sort of moral justification to the rule of the men who have shown most ability in making use of the command over natural forces obtained by discoveries and inventions to extract wealth for themselves by means of the labor of their fellows; the men who I have shown most skill in turning other peoples' needs and other peoples' capacities to their own private advantage. Even now one constantly hears the argument, He has got on by his own ability, and has a right to keep to himself what he has made. Just as if mere superior sharpness could justly entitle a man to climb on the backs of his fellows and sit there at his ease, weighing them down like another Old Man of the Sea. And yet the superstition of reason worship forbids the victim to throw him off. He is only taking the rent of his ability, say the economists. That is the latest excuse invented by the hired defenders of things as they are for the man who demands two puddings for dinner instead of one (the second made from other peoples' rations), because he is so clever ! Idle landlords and shareholders they are constrained to throw over, but still they arm themselves with logic to defend the last fortress of privilege, the right of brain monopoly to exploit.

And there are "Socialists" who argue that the enemy may be left in possession !

Thus the superstition of reason worship, i.e., the isolation of reason from the rest of the faculties and capacities of man, and the exaggerated and narrow estimate of its relative importance, has, like all superstitions, become a sanction for the oppression of man by man. A sanction that has replaced the old consecration by a supposed divine mandate of the might that makes right.

On the other hand, the good, the higher possibility of development: that has come to us with our recognition of our own intellectual force is beyond all measure. Even the undue stress that has not been without its uses. But of this more next time.

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