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Returning to Reason Reasonably by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Return to Reason by Stephen Toulmin. Harvard University Press. 243 pp. \$ 24.95.

STEPHEN TOULMIN'S Return to Reason provides an occasion to reflect on the remarkable fact that our faith in reason is currently on the decline --- and that our professors are taking the lead in killing it.

Of course that part of reasoning that involves the ability to calculate and create is prospering. We continue to produce an astronomical amount of data, to acquire ever greater knowledge of facts and figures, and to invent awe-inspiring machines that enable us to manipulate nature with ever greater precision and that make our lives more comfortable and secure (as well as those that menace us and threaten our species' very existence). The part of reason in which our faith has been faltering concerns the moral life. One hears the distrust in ordinary talk. Projecting a certain humility, sophisticated people say of this action or that practice, "Who am I to judge?", by which they really mean, somewhat aggressively, "Who are you or anybody else to judge?" In the academy, the often thoughtless live-and-let-live liberal relativism of the 1970s and '80s opened the door in many disciplines to forms of thought that disparaged or denied the ability of reason to distinguish soundly between good and evil, to accurately discern moral principles, and to justly rank rival ways of life.

These days the academic attack on reasoning about the moral life comes from many quarters. In some cases it has less to do with what a discipline says than with what the discipline will not allow, or deems of too little significance, to be said. Economic analysis, for example, assumes that human beings are rational maximizers of their satisfactions. Its object of study is what people actually desire, the cost of satisfying those desires, and how institutions and rules can be reformed so as to make the satisfaction of desire more efficient. With the exception perhaps of the examination of the ground rules that every person should desire because they would make everybody better off, what people ought to desire is not generally thought of as a meaningful question within the field of economics. Or as it is sometimes said, the enterprise of economics is value-neutral.

This approach, powerful and of undoubted utility in its own realm, especially in dealing with commercial activity and large-scale social phenomena, would not be troubling were economic analysis confined to economics departments or what is conventionally thought of as the economic sphere. Over the last thirty years or so, however, political scientists and legal

scholars have been increasingly drawn to explaining politics and law in economic terms, and by now economic analysis has achieved a dominant position in both disciplines. This too would not be troubling, given the impressive power of economic analysis to explain the costs of various commercial and political and legal alternatives, were it not for the aspiration of many of those who wield economic analysis to extend it to all areas of moral and political life. The implication --- liberating to many, disconcerting to those who think it unreasonable to reduce human motivation to self-interest narrowly understood --- is that all of human life can be explained without recourse to reasoning about justice and the good.

LIKE ECONOMIC ANALYSIS, analytic philosophy, which is the bread and butter of most Anglo-American philosophy departments, refrains on principle from reasoning about the moral life. To be sure, the intense investigation of the premises and implications of all sorts of concepts to which analytic philosophers are devoted includes the investigation of moral concepts. But by and large academic philosophy confines itself to evaluating a concept's internal coherence, not its truth or falsity.

In spirit, postmodernism, which has its base in literature departments but has enthusiastic adherents throughout the humanities and also in political science and law, may appear to be the antithesis of both economic analysis and analytic philosophy. Whereas the former are devoted to that indispensable part of reasoning sometimes called rationality --- the finding of general patterns in the world through empirical observation and the evaluation of the logical relation between concepts --- post-modernism sets out from the assumption that all patterns are arbitrary constructions, that truth as well as logic are human inventions, and that all aspects of life are contingent and revisable. Indeed, whereas economic analysis and analytic philosophy represent a kind of hyper-rationality, postmodernism represents a kind of hyper-antirationality. But in rejecting all forms of reasoning, including reasoning about the moral life, postmodernism actually joins forces with economic analysis and analytic philosophy to shut down serious, systematic inquiry into questions about the virtues and the good.

Many political theorists have thought that proceduralism, associated above all with the name of John Rawls, provides a solution to the rampant disparagement or denial of the possibility of reasoning about the moral life. By searching for fair rules under which everybody in principle could agree to live, proceduralism shifts the focus from questions about virtue and substantive human goods to those about formal requirements and abstract principles, while still prescribing some practices and policies and proscribing others. In the end, though, proceduralism represents a strategy of avoidance. And an inadequate one at that. For one thing, it presupposes a morally binding equality among human beings for which it has neither argument nor explanation. For another, it insinuates that the elaboration of a fair process for reaching decisions about how our collective life ought to be arranged is all there is for reason to say about morality, once again implicitly affirming the incapacity of reason, in connection to the virtues and the human good, to say anything useful.

TOULMIN, A DISTINGUISHED professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California, thinks the decline of reason must be arrested and reversed. Indeed, he sees promising indications, particularly in the recent resurgence of interest in pragmatism. But before we can truly recover our bearings, we must first understand the causes of the current mess. In fact, argues Toulmin, the decline of reason is nothing new. Contemporary intellectual life is an expression of developments set in motion at the dawn of modernity. Our ideas about reason have a history, and by recounting that history Toulmin means to prepare our liberation from the clutches of the false notions that have reduced reason to rationality or, in the case of postmodernism, have sought to cast irrationality as our fate.

Although Toulmin provides a fascinating array of anecdotes, particularly about his teacher Wittgenstein, and devotes many pages to chronicling technical debates in twentieth-century academic philosophy, the overarching story line he offers is familiar to students of the history of ideas. Reason lost its balance, according to Toulmin, in the seventeenth century. For almost two millennia before that, philosophy, the disciplined exercise of human reason, had been understood to comprise "the systematic and methodical treatment of any subject." From astronomy and geometry to autobiographical essays and historical narrative and everything in between, philosophy took its subject matter as it found it, and fashioned its inquiries, as Aristotle advised in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in accordance with the standards of precision inherent in the subject itself. In the seventeenth century, however, with the astonishing triumphs of Newton's mathematical physics, mathematical precision came to be seen as the one and only standard of precision. Traditional speculation about human nature, about the passions, about virtue and vice, about first principles, could not meet this exacting standard, so such speculation was deemed unphilosophical and excluded from the domain of that which could be reasoned about.

Philosophy, however, tried to adapt. In particular, moral and political philosophy attempted to model themselves on geometry. The prestige obtained by the effective predictions of the natural sciences helped give birth to the human sciences, which meant the replacement of the humanities by the study of human conduct modeled on the natural sciences. As the Enlightenment unfolded, theoretical abstraction and logical deduction replaced observation of human beings in human contexts. A premium was placed on the ability to demonstrate as against the power to illuminate. Disciplines emerged, which allowed for specialization, but also consigned ethics to its own intellectual corner, as if it were a separate and distinct inquiry with no necessary or integral relation to the other disciplines. The culmination of what Toulmin calls the "dreams of rationalism" can be seen in the twenty-first century university, dominated on one side by an arid rationality and on the other by an arid postmodern rejection of rationality.

HOW SHALL WE extricate ourselves from this mess? How shall we restore reason's rightful role in guiding moral and political life? The answer, suggests Toulmin, consists first in taking the measure of our loss and then embracing and extending the rebellion led by John Dewey at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the name of pragmatism, against the "quest for

certainty" in moral and political life. This means, for Toulmin, recognizing that the vast array of topics that present themselves to the inquiring mind demand different methods and different standards of precision. It means dissolving the rigid intellectual hierarchy according to which the hard sciences are more respectable than the soft social sciences and the soft social sciences are more respectable than what is left of the squishy humanities. It means appreciating the vital importance of thick cultural description, of the sort exemplified by the work of Clifford Geertz, not so as to replace the discovery of general truths, but so as to place the discovery on a more solid foundation. It means cultivating what Aristotle called *phronesis*, the practical judgment that is acquired through experience. And it means respecting rhetoric --- which is not merely the art of wily speech but of persuasive speech in general --- since how people speak serves both to conceal and reveal the beliefs that inform and affect their actions.

These are all useful correctives. But none have exclusively or even primarily Deweyan roots. And what is primary to Dewey's pragmatism Toulmin takes too far. Way too far.

"Dewey," Toulmin asserts, "was right to suggest that Pragmatism is not just one theory on a par with all others. Rather, it represents a change of view, which puts theorizing on a par with all other practical activities." This is right insofar as it fairly captures Dewey's ambition to disenchant theory and the world that theory comprehends. But Toulmin is wrong to affirm Dewey's disenchantment of theory and the world as a principal achievement supporting the return to reason. For the reduction of theory to a form of practice is itself an aggressive act of theorizing. And it is one that is false to experience and hamstring reflection about the moral life.

The Deweyan question --- "What forms of life support, and rely on, one or another variety of substantive knowledge?" --- is a good one. Alas, by putting theorizing on a par with all other activities, Dewey surreptitiously imposed theoretical limits on what philosophy can ask and the kinds of answers it can offer. We need to know not only the relation between forms of life and varieties of substantive knowledge, but also which forms of life to prefer, and which enable human beings to flourish. Here Dewey's pragmatism falls silent or collapses into trite prescriptions about extending democracy to more and more areas of life. In fact, Dewey's pragmatism is too hostile to theory, too rigid in its repudiation of metaphysics, too resolute in its contempt for religion to serve as a guide in the restoration of reason. Under the guise of liberating the human mind, Deweyan pragmatism forecloses too many lines of worthy inquiry and valid human options.

WHAT IS NEEDED TODAY is the cultivation of something much more akin to Socratic skepticism and Millian many-sidedness, both of which take as their point of departure the variety of ways of being human, have as their object the truth about man and his nature, and in principle demand a genuine openness to opinions --- including the opinion that proclaims that for all our efforts to blot out its signs and intimations, we live in an ordered and enchanted universe. To restore faith in reason we must return to it reasonably.

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