

Introduction



Reason's Twin

For the past few millennia, many human beings have placed their hopes for rising out of the mess we have been born into—the mess of war and violence, the pain of unfulfilled passions or of passions fulfilled to excess, the degradation of living like brutes—in a single faculty, rumored to be had by all and only members of the human species. We call this faculty “rationality,” or “reason.” It is often said to have been discovered in ancient Greece, and was elevated to an almost divine status at the beginning of the modern period in Europe. Perhaps no greater emblem of this modern cult can be found than the “Temples of Reason” that were briefly set up in confiscated Catholic churches in the wake of the French Revolution of 1789. This repurposing of the august medieval houses of worship, at the same time, shows what may well be an ineliminable contradiction in the human effort to live our lives in accordance with reason, and to model society on rational principles. There is something absurd, indeed irrational, about giving reason its own temples. What is one supposed to do in them? Pray? Bow down? But aren't these the very same prostrations that worshippers had previously performed in the churches, from which we were supposed to be liberated?

Any triumph of reason, we might be expected to understand these days, is temporary and reversible. Any utopian effort to permanently set things in order, to banish extremism and to secure comfortable quiet lives for all within a society constructed on rational principles, is doomed from the start. The problem is, again, evidently of a dialectical nature, where the thing desired contains its opposite, where every earnest stab at rationally building up society crosses over sooner or later, as if by some natural law, into an eruption of irrational violence. The harder we struggle for reason, it seems, the more we lapse into

unreason. The desire to impose rationality, to make people or society more rational, mutates, as a rule, into spectacular outbursts of irrationality. It either triggers romantic irrationalism as a reaction, or it induces in its most ardent promoters the incoherent idea that rationality is something that may be imposed by force or by the rule of the enlightened few over the benighted masses.

This book proceeds through an abundance of illustrations and what are hoped to be instructive ornamentations, but the argument at its core is simple: that it is irrational to seek to eliminate irrationality, both in society and in our own exercise of our mental faculties. When elimination is attempted, the result is what the French historian Paul Hazard memorably called *la Raison aggressive*, “aggressive Reason.”¹

Enlightenment into Myth

The continuous movement between the two poles of rationality and irrationality—the aggressive turn that reason takes, transforming into its opposite—is described in compelling detail by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their monumental 1944 work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.² Composed in Californian exile as the war unleashed by the Nazi regime was raging in their home country and largely destroying the civilization that had formed them, theirs is an account that need not be repeated, and that cannot be bettered. The German authors are particularly interested in how “enlightenment reverts to mythology,” that is, how a social philosophy based upon the perfection and application of reason for the solution of society’s problems, for the benefit of all, may transform or harden into fascism: a political ideology that involves no real exercise of reason at all, but only the application of brute force, and manipulation of the majority for the benefit of a few.

Quite a lot has happened since 1944. Adorno and Horkheimer were prescient, and remain relevant, but there is much that they could not anticipate. Marxism remains a valuable analytical tool for scholars to understand the course of global history. Revolutionary movements

aiming at radical economic redistribution also continue to exercise their attraction for many people throughout the world, even as the first great attempt to establish socialism through revolution collapsed before the end of the twentieth century. In the early twenty-first century, we are still struggling to understand the new phenomenon of Trumpism-Putinism, which seems unprecedented in its ideological nebulousness, but which also seems to be a clear announcement of the end, or at least the life-threatening crisis, of liberal democracy, which had until this most recent era had its stronghold, as an aspiration and an ideal, in the United States.

Adorno and Horkheimer are credited with predicting that the iteration of liberal political ideology—which on their view only pretends to be an absence of ideology—that reigned in the mid-twentieth century had an arc that naturally bent toward fascism. Recently some have similarly argued that the current global surge of populism, locally inflected in the United States with the rise of Donald Trump, is simply the inevitable conclusion of a process. Liberal democracy molts its skin, and what emerges is variously identified as either the slick serpent of fascism or the common garden snake of populist nationalism: in either case an emergence that had been predicted decades earlier by a pair of insightful German Marxists in strange sun-kissed exile. Trump is pretending to be a successor to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, but he does not care about the same things they did. The imperative to “make America great again” is grounded in a mythology of what America once was that is fundamentally incompatible with Enlightenment, with knowing who we are and where we in fact came from. Adorno and Horkheimer’s formula has come true, then: Enlightenment has reverted to mythology. The German authors took this to be a problem with Enlightenment itself, though other explanations, as we will see in the chapters that follow, also present themselves.

It is not at all clear, in any case, that Trump himself is an anti-Enlightenment ideologue. He does not appear to have the requisite clarity or maturity for such a well-defined commitment. He has, however, been surrounded by such ideologues. He benefits from their support, and so has become if not an irrational agent of anti-Enlightenment,

then at least a subrational vector of it. His rise coincides historically with the appearance in the intellectual landscape of many authors and personalities who are articulating coherent critiques of the core commitments of Enlightenment philosophy. We may summarize these commitments as follows: first, that each of us is endowed with the faculty of reason, capable of knowing ourselves and our place in the natural and social worlds; second, that the best organization of society is the one that enables us to freely use our reason in order both to thrive as individuals and to contribute in our own way to the good of society. We may wish to make some more fine-grained revisions to this rough-and-ready definition of Enlightenment, but it will be good enough for now. It will be good enough, in particular, for understanding what it is that is now under attack, by Trump and Vladimir Putin and their epigones; by the nouveaux riches of Silicon Valley who are fostering a culture of post-Enlightenment, postdemocratic values, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously; and by the various thinkers who, for now, manage to position themselves within our intellectual landscape as “edgy” by rejecting such long-cherished desiderata for society as equality and democratic participation.

The dialectic of enlightenment—here I mean not the book, but the process—has been well studied, and not just by Marxists. Even the neoconservative French thinker Pascal Bruckner argued already in 1995 that individualism has tribalism as its ultimate logical terminus, since in a society based on individual freedom the individual “may have gained freedom, but he has lost security.”³ Thus the now-familiar transformation of the likes of the young computer hacker and the old cattle rancher who, circa 2008, thought of themselves as libertarians, but by 2016 were ready to sign up for a sort of statist-nationalist personality cult.

It was the liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin who popularized the term “counter-Enlightenment” in English in a 1973 article. As Zeev Sternhell notes, the term first appears in German, as *Gegen-Aufklärung*, in Friedrich Nietzsche, and is widespread in Germany in the early twentieth century. Sternhell himself, a liberal historian of ideas, published his important study *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* in 2006;

there he details the significance of the work of such figures as Edmund Burke and J. G. Herder for the history of modern political thought. According to Sternhell, the two tendencies are born together in the eighteenth century, a period that “marks not only the birth of rationalist modernity, but also its antithesis.”⁴ To identify the thesis and antithesis as appearing together both historically and conceptually is to see counter-Enlightenment less as Enlightenment’s opposite than as its twin, and to see unreason less as reason’s opposite than as the dark side of a unified and indivisible whole.

As Sternhell notes, the counter-Enlightenment, as a movement and a sensibility, existed long before it was given a name. He sees the early eighteenth-century Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico as the first to articulate a vision of the world that values that which is irreducibly individual, as opposed to what would soon become the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the importance of the universal. Sternhell’s taxonomy, of who belongs to which side of the split between Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment, is sometimes idiosyncratic, as indeed any attempt at such a taxonomy must be. For example, he identifies Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a central figure of the French Enlightenment. More recently, Pankaj Mishra, in his popular *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*, contrasts the paradigmatic Enlightenment thought of Voltaire with Rousseauian particularism as its opposite. Emblematic of their respective stances, Mishra thinks, are the positions these thinkers took up regarding the question of Poland’s right to national self-determination. Voltaire, in the service and pay of Empress Catherine of Russia, believed that the Poles were a hopelessly backward and benighted people, and that this condition helped to justify a prospective military conquest of Poland by the Russian Empire. They must be brought Enlightenment by force, Voltaire thought.

Rousseau, by contrast, in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, written in the early 1770s, argued that Poland should maintain its own national customs and not allow itself to be absorbed into any homogenized, pan-European culture. If this sort of cultural resistance is achieved, Rousseau thinks, then even under political domination by a foreign power, a nation cannot be fully subdued or annihilated. “See

to it that no Pole can ever become a Russian,” he writes, and “I guarantee that Russia will not subjugate Poland.”⁵ Mishra takes the respective positions of these two thinkers to stand at the beginning of two very different lineages of modern thought. Voltaire’s zeal for spreading Enlightenment by force, and his belief that there is, in effect, only one way to do things right, a universal standard for how society should be organized, would have as its latter-day descendants such failed adventures as the 2003 neoconservative-led invasion of Iraq. Rousseau, in turn, is the ancestor of those counterhegemonic forces that resist universalist imperialism and globalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as Islamic fundamentalism, and such as the varieties of populism that resulted in Brexit and the election of Donald Trump.

The Enlightenment has come back into broad public attention in the United States in the past few years, promoted and celebrated by thinkers and pundits who are susceptible neither to the siren call of right-wing populism nor to indignant identitarianism, the withdrawal into identity groups and the corresponding preoccupation with hierarchies of privilege that has emerged on the left, and that has in particular captured the spirits of many American university students. Some thinkers who reject both of these poles see them as enantiomorphic expressions of the same illiberal rejection of individual reason and autonomy, and have insisted in turn on what is now sometimes described as “radical centrism.” The psychologist Steven Pinker, notably, has to his credit sensed that at the present historical moment, in which there is widespread and generally unreflective dismissal on both the right and the left of the legacy of the Enlightenment, it is time to reevaluate and to defend its real contributions to human progress. Pinker’s 2018 book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* makes the case that there is much that is defensible.⁶ Yet he has been rightly criticized for conflating Enlightenment philosophy with scientific rationality, whereas the historical record plainly shows that the great majority of canonical Enlightenment philosophers placed great value on the role of the sentiments and passions in guiding the conduct of our lives, and warned of the many dangers of subordinating ourselves to the supreme authority of the faculty of reason.

A less common but no less serious criticism that may be leveled at Pinker's work has to do with his apparent lack of sensibility to what we have been calling the dialectic of Enlightenment. Pinker scarcely mentions Adorno and Horkheimer, which is not necessarily a fault in itself. What is faulty, however, is the ungrounded presumption that the way in which Enlightenment entails its opposite is not worthy of serious attention in a book devoted to recovering that era's philosophical and political legacies for today's world. Failure to take this entailment seriously means not only that there is no serious reckoning with the sort of mutation, from liberalism into fascism, that interested Adorno and Horkheimer most from their perch on the left. It also leaves the Enlightenment-defender unable to account for the evident hypocrisy and limitations innate in Enlightenment discourse—the refusal, for example, of the defenders of the 1791 *Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man* to accept Olympe de Gouge's feminist riposte, the *Universal Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*; or the refusal of many French revolutionaries to accept that the values inspiring them might also quicken the slaves of Saint Domingue into revolt. There are serious arguments to the effect that these are not just glitches in a basically well-worked-out program; rather, the ways in which Enlightenment contradicts and undermines itself have been intrinsic to the project all along. Even if one rejects these arguments, they are not coming from the fringe, and they deserve to be addressed.

Much further downstream from the Enlightenment we have Jordan B. Peterson, who has appeared lately on the North American cultural scene almost as if to illustrate Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis especially for us. Peterson has claimed to be a "classic liberal," and yet the following he has garnered for himself might better be understood as the spontaneous congealing of an identitarianism for young, disaffected men. This identitarianism vividly mirrors the one being promoted on what is now sometimes called the "intersectional" left, or in the corners of the internet that are said to be "woke," that is, roughly, attuned, perhaps hyperattuned, to the ways in which racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression structure everyday social reality and define the range of every person's experiences, whether consciously

aware of this or not. Peterson's fans have been effectively excluded from these woke circles (unless prepared to take on the prostrate and unctuous role of "allies"), and they flock to him seething with resentment and a newfound identitarian consciousness of their own. He is perhaps not to blame for the crowd he attracts, but, even on its own merits, his claim to be a successor to the Enlightenment fails to make much sense of what the Enlightenment in fact was, and of the many complicated branchings of its legacy. One of his enduring preoccupations is with the ravages wrought by twentieth-century state communism. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, who take fascism alone to be the dialectically entailed opposite of Enlightenment, Peterson takes left authoritarianism to be the opposite simply and straightforwardly, which is to say nondialectically, of the political and social philosophy he claims to prefer. What this misses, obviously, is that the various twentieth-century revolutions of workers and peasants, from the Bolsheviks in 1917 to the genocidal Cambodian regime in the late 1970s, have a real genealogical link to the philosophy articulated in the 1791 *Universal Declaration*, which may be seen as a distillation of the philosophical spirit of the Enlightenment. This is not to condemn the Enlightenment for giving us the Khmer Rouge, but only to acknowledge what should be obvious, that no one should be taken seriously in his claim to be the Enlightenment's heir who does not in turn acknowledge all the other wayward heirs, however estranged from them he may be. The Enlightenment may indeed be worth defending, but it is at least "problematic" enough, as the illiberal left has taken to saying, to obligate its serious defenders to face up to, and to attempt to account for, all of its *dérives*, all the ways it has failed to live up to its own vision of human potential.

The Present Moment

This is a book and not a social-media post, and for that reason it is perhaps unwise to engage overmuch with figures who may well have lapsed back into obscurity—from which they had briefly emerged by

the power of clicks alone—in the months between final submission of the manuscript and its appearance in print. So let us try to hew close to those sources that by now appear safely canonical. However our canonical authors divide things up, and whatever the political orientation informing their historiography, Adorno and Horkheimer, Berlin, Sternhell, Mishra, and other authors agree, and compellingly show, that there has been a basic tension in the history of modern thought, between universalism and particularism: between those who think that humanity has a single destiny in virtue of a nature that is shared equally by all peoples, and those who think that each group has a *Sonderweg*—a particular path that makes what is right or fitting for it untranslatable into other contexts, and impossible to place within a hierarchical scheme that compares or ranks the attainments of one group relative to those of another. It is not my intention to recite, again, this very familiar story, even if it is inevitable that our concerns significantly intersect with the concerns of all those who have recited it so well. Historians of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment have typically been interested primarily in theories as to what constitutes the best ideals and values around which to organize a society. They have been, obviously, aware that reason is a value associated with the Enlightenment, while the counter-Enlightenment, if not always celebrating unreason, has at least been wary of setting its opposite up as the supreme principle of social organization. Significantly less attention has been paid by these authors, for the most part, to reason as it is conceptualized in modern philosophy, as a particular faculty of the human mind, and, in turn, to the respects in which the political philosophy of the Enlightenment—to invoke the central insight of Plato’s *Republic*—is in the end a philosophy of the human soul writ large. Or, as Germaine de Staël put it in the early nineteenth century, “Maintenance of the principles that constitute the basis of the social order cannot be contrary to philosophy, since these principles are in agreement with reason.”⁷

Whether or not we are justified in moving between these two scales, the soul and the city, the individual and the state, it is important to understand that as a matter of fact our contemporaries do move back

and forth freely, just as Plato did, and seldom pause to ask whether the individual really is such a microcosm of society, whether what we learn of the one applies at the same time to the other. Thus, to cite a recent example from the press on the now-common theme of the effect of social media on our cognitive functioning and on social order, Paul Lewis writes in a *Guardian* article in late 2017, “If Apple, Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are gradually chipping away at our ability to control our own minds, could there come a point, I ask, at which democracy no longer functions?”⁸ Is democracy, then, the sum total of the workings of individuals who exercise control over their own minds? Is the loss of such control, which is precisely a loss of what we often call rationality, necessarily a loss, as well, of the best arrangement of society?

The history of reflection on the mental faculty of reason, on which the social philosophy of Enlightenment is supposed to be built, of course far precedes the beginning of the modern period, even if it is only in the modern period that it came to be broadly mythologized, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s sense, turned retroactively into the basis of a civilization dating back to antiquity (or perhaps only retroactively dated back to antiquity), “the West,” even if in its early incarnations in ancient Greece it was sooner a sort of fetish of strange cults, like the Pythagoreans, than it was a widely shared civic virtue.

Many believe that the zone we call “the West,” and the values of the people in it, occupy a unique place in world history, yielding up achievements and monuments unlike those of what is sometimes disparagingly, and rhymingly, dismissed as “the rest.” It is not my direct purpose here to refute this view, but perhaps a few words in that direction will be useful. At the time of the first European encounter with the Americas, Europe was a relatively insignificant—relatively unproductive, relatively unaccomplished—peninsula of Eurasia. The great centers of activity were not France, Holland, England, Germany, but rather the Mediterranean, the Middle East, central and East Asia. Europe began to become what we think of it as being, the center of the world, at the moment it entered into extremely intensive economic coexistence

with the broader Atlantic region. From this moment on, moreover, Europe took it as its mission and destiny to engulf the rest of the world within its fold. There is no “West” without a non-West outside of it that is seen to be ever in need of Westernization. Europe is nothing by itself. No region of the world ever has been, or ever could be. This is not, then, a slight against Europe and its extensions, but only a matter of basic geographical and historical literacy. This is something that the most recent incarnations of extreme, identitarian politics quite manifestly lack, and it is part of my purpose here to disrupt this lazy ignorance.

This ignorance has grown worse of late. Just when it might have seemed that an era of true cosmopolitanism was at hand, societies around the world have retreated into crude nationalism, and have invented or revived infantile mythopoetical explanations for their own exceptional status among the world’s peoples—that the ancient Indians invented airplanes, for example, and that you can read about these in the Vedas: their own divinely or biologically ordained *Sonderweg*. Some Americans of principally or apparently European heritage have embraced a form of identitarianism that makes a fetish out of something as flimsy and as little understood as a haplotype. They have been spotted celebrating milk, of all things, as a symbol of white supremacy, both because it is itself white, and also because they vaguely understand that there was a genetic mutation among their European ancestors, some thousands of years ago, that led to a relative predominance of lactose tolerance, which in turn is thought to have conferred certain survival advantages.⁹ This may in fact be how things happened in the Paleolithic, yet it is a strange source of cultural pride in the present moment, and one cannot help but seek to understand the forces that are driving it.

It is undeniable that the internet has done much to facilitate this most recent explosion of irrationalism in public life. White-supremacist dairy parties are but one of countless manifestations of what seems to be a moment of cultural frenzy, of unsustainable intensity, marking a transition to a new and still unforeseeable landscape of customs and mores, underlain by new political norms and new institutional structures. And it is those on the margins, people with nothing to lose, who

are best positioned to benefit from these transformations. Anyone can get on the internet and make some noise. Anyone can troll, and change the world for the worse; and it is not hard to hope, when trolling from the margins, that out of this worsened condition new opportunities will emerge to accrue power or at least to thrive in a small-scale way. Thus the internet is the great vehicle of what has been called “accelerationism,” whereby those with nothing to lose intentionally make things worse, in order that they may get better sooner, in ways that cannot be foreseen, while those who have something to lose at present also have reason to fear. This is only one of the respects in which the internet is a revolutionary tool.

Just as the internet has made possible the disruption or in some cases destruction of journalism, academia, commerce, the movie and publishing industries as we knew them, and the like, so too has it made possible a circumvention of the establishment checks determining what had previously been considered acceptable political discourse. The internet is the new transformation of the apparatus that confines, catalyzes, and accelerates the passions of the *bête humaine*, as Émile Zola characterized humanity in its new relation to the railroad in an 1890 novel of that name: a human creation that speeds up and intensifies human social life, and plows through so much of what we had previously valued, even if its initial promise was only to give us improved access to what we valued.

Only a short decade or so ago, it could still plausibly be hoped that this new forum might serve as the “public sphere” in Jürgen Habermas’s sense, the locus in which deliberative democracy happens, and the best decisions are made through collective deliberation. Now it appears a far darker place, where the normal and predictable response to reasonable statements is, if it is coming from strangers, sheer abuse, and often concerted and massive campaigns of abuse; if it is coming from friends, then it is generally vacuous supportiveness, sheer boosterism with no critical engagement or respectful dissent. And unless we are dealing with people whose flesh-and-blood existence we have been able to confirm, on the internet we often do not know whether our abuse is coming from a real person at all, or only from a bot, or

some sock puppet laboring away at a Russian troll farm, working to insinuate some new falsehood into public consciousness. And to make it all worse, distinctions between friend and foe have become largely a matter of algorithms working on and reinforcing our innate—but, until recently, surmountable—tendency to carve up social reality according to a binary us/them dichotomy.

Most recently, moreover, the ignorant, paranoid, and hateful spirit of unmoderated comments sections has managed to spill out into political reality, congealed in the very person of the president of the United States. The causes of this fall and this failure are numerous. In part it may be that mass participation in internet discourse, a discourse we for far too long thought of as fundamentally text-based (even though our actual practices on the internet mark a radical break in the history of textual communication), has unwittingly shifted our attention to the sort of information that is not, and cannot be, conveyed in reasoned arguments, but rather only in suggestions, images, insinuations, jokes.

Very few internet users are prepared to justify, or are at all interested in justifying, their political commitments by means of reasoned arguments. Instead, memes proliferate that associate or juxtapose ideas—Hillary Clinton is sickly; Bernie Sanders is a charmed old man with the power to attract birds to his podium when he speaks; Donald Trump would look good adorned with an imperial crown and staff—in ways that alter our perception of political reality without the occurrence of any real process of reflection. What we far too long took to be the transition of political debate into a new medium has in fact degenerated into an exchange of tropes we know from storybooks, of crones and wizards and naked emperors. These figures are so familiar and meaningful to us that we are able to forget that, as folktales, these units of culture, these memes, fulfill a human need very different from the one that political participation has been thought, at its best, to fulfill.

These units of culture satisfy the imagination, momentarily, but leave the world unimproved. They are a consolation for those who are disenfranchised from politics, not a suitable vehicle of political participation itself. When in 2016 politics became largely a matter of meme warfare, we were thrust into a situation in which, not only could we no

longer pretend we were living in a deliberative democracy, but we had now abandoned even the aspiration to this, in favor of a pursuit of politics at a purely cultural level. This “politics,” with memetic myths and tall folktales, has ancient roots in the free play of the imagination among people who had no hope of participating in the political life of their societies. Imagination is a powerful tool, but—as the faculty of which no one, not even the most disenfranchised and underinformed, can be deprived—it is also often deployed in desperation. The narrator of Virginia Woolf’s 1929 short story “The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection” describes the method available to us when we are confronted with the silent and enigmatic character of Isabella: “It was absurd, it was monstrous. If she concealed so much and knew so much one must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand—the imagination.”¹⁰ Imagination prizes things open, and we resort to it, particularly, in the absence of knowledge. Imagination is like a bright-colored dye infused into a cell on a microscope slide: it makes the invisible visible, even as it distorts and perhaps endangers the thing we had wanted to see, to know, by means of it.

To some extent, of course, politics has always played out, even in the most enlightened times, through visuals and suggestions, through hints and insinuations, and has always gone to work on us at an affective level. But new tools for carrying this work out, tools that combine both creative imagination and technical expertise, have ceded an outsized responsibility for our political destiny to the technologically literate but argumentatively subliterate, to the meme-makers, to online subcultural insiders. It should not be altogether surprising that these sectors of society were not necessarily prepared to wield their new, tremendous power in a responsible way.

We are living through a moment of extreme irrationality, of fervency and ebullience, of destabilization and fear. An important part of the story of how we arrived here seems to be the collapse of traditional safeguards for the preservation of rational procedures and deliberation, and the unwitting injection of so much colored dye into public debate as to obscure altogether the objects these colors were initially intended to bring into clearer view. Again, there are many people who

evidently welcome this turn. It is rather those who value caution and reserve who feel suddenly as if they belong to another era, and have woken up to find their concerns, their habits—in short, their world—simply gone. It is those who have a weakness for legitimation from a crumbling establishment, from what will soon be the *ancien régime*, who have the most to lose, those who seek to preserve the old way of doing things: maintaining subscriptions to print media, publishing books, getting humanities degrees, supporting mainstream candidates in mainstream political parties, listening to well-reasoned arguments. These are the people who likely feel the sharpest disappointment at the seizure of the internet by the forces of aggression and chaos, at a moment when we can still hear echoing, from the most recent past, the grandest claims about its power to serve us as an engine for the rational ordering of human life in society.

We are, then, not so far from where Hippasus found himself millennia ago. The Greeks discovered the irrationality at the heart of geometry; we have most recently discovered the irrationality at the heart of the algorithm, or at least the impossibility of applying algorithms to human life while avoiding their weaponization by the forces of irrationality. If we were not possessed of such a strong will to believe that our technological discoveries and our conceptual progress might have the power to chase irrationality, uncertainty, and disorder from our lives—if, that is, we could learn to be more philosophical about our human situation—then we would likely be far better positioned to avoid the violent recoil that always seems to follow upon our greatest innovations, upon bagging the great hunting trophies of our reason.

Irrationality: A Road Map

In chapter 1 we consider **logic**, along with its limits, its abuses and distortions. We look at the ways in which it has often been set up in contrast to rhetoric throughout history, even if in fact it has often been co-opted for similar ends. In this connection we consider the peculiar and understudied phenomenon of claims or arguments that are

perfectly true from a logical point of view, but that are summoned for purposes that can only be described as dishonest—thus the phenomenon of truths that “have the operation of falsity.” We go on to consider the preoccupation with fallacies and sophisms in the history of logic, and the way in which these were sometimes deployed to produce what might be considered a distorted mirror image of the science of reason, now deformed into a science of unreason. From an initial investigation of logic in a narrow sense, we move on to the adjacent domain of rational-choice theory; we investigate the many muted presuppositions about human agency and rationality this theory involves—presuppositions that patently fail to capture what is often at work in actual human decisions. We turn next to what in some senses appears as the exact opposite of logic—claims of mystical experience, in which by definition the subject is unable to formulate in shareable propositions the experience in question, and thus unable to submit claims about it to logical scrutiny. At the same time, historically speaking, mystical experience, and the way it is mobilized socially for the founding of new religious sects, has much in common with the paradox-mongering of some philosophical sects. In fact, while we think of cults as devoted to dogmas that are inscrutable or immediately false to outsiders, in fact they are also able, if not just as likely, to form around a shared interest in critical thinking or reason. Thus we see an illustration of the problem at the heart of our investigation, where devotion to reason as a supreme principle all too easily collapses into unreason.

In chapter 2 we turn to what may be called the “**no-brainer**” problem. Throughout history, there has been a certain ambiguity in the way the term “rational” is applied. It is often applied to machines, to nature as a whole, to abstract processes or systems, and (rather less commonly), to animals, where any of these things are able to function in a proper or suitable way without going haywire or breaking down. At other times, though, “rational” is reserved for human beings, and perhaps also for God and the angels, to the extent that these beings not only function properly, but also make conscious decisions. Human beings, using their brains, follow a course of deliberation to arrive at a conscious decision; this decision may turn out to be either wrong

or right. Some have argued that this deliberation, and this tendency to get things wrong, make us less rational, not more, than all those things that lack brains and do not deliberate, but simply do what they do automatically in accordance with their nature. That which is considered least rational by some, then, such as a mere animal, may be considered most rational by others; and human beings, from a certain point of view, may be said to be not exemplars of reason, but faulty approximations of it. In this connection, we look in particular at some recent work on rationality as an evolved superpower, one that is flawed like many evolutionary adaptations, but still remarkable and rare in the order of nature. We turn next to some concrete illustrations of the failure of reason in human life (and in the author's life), failures that seem to be illustrations of the status of reason as a mere adaptation, one that does what it can to enable us to survive, but has its limits, and sometimes causes unexpected problems.

In chapter 3 we take on **dreams**, or, more precisely, the curious and troubling fact that about one-third of a typical human life is spent in the grip of delirious hallucinations. These often defy all of what we think we know about the rational order of the world; most troublingly of all, when we are in their grip the fact that our reason has absconded does not seem to bother us. This ineliminable feature of human life has been dealt with in different ways in different places and times, and the differences reveal much about the particular value of rationality in a given society. Aristotle remained cautiously open to the idea that dreams are prophetic. In the early modern period, Native North Americans planned their lives and structured their group decisions around dreams, which seemed illogical and even terrifying to the Europeans who encountered them. The emerging, and sharply contrasting, sensibility within Europe itself by now held that dreams were something best moved on from at the moment of awakening, while waking, in turn, now needed rigorous philosophical arguments to prove that it was not in fact dreaming. At the same time, of course, dreams would never be fully suppressed even if philosophy sought to minimize their importance. They would continue to permeate culture more broadly, and by the end of the nineteenth century they would roar back onto

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the scene with psychoanalysis and the purported discovery of the unconscious as the real locus of our individual identities. Throughout the previous three centuries or so, much discussion had centered on dreams, not only in the narrow sense of what we experience in sleep proper, but also any phantasm of the mind, any images produced that cannot be precisely matched to the external world, any voices heard with no speaker outside of us to be found. How to deal with these manifestations of the irrational, and where to draw the boundary between productive imagination and delusional phantasm, defined much of the discussion of rationality in modern Europe, and was central to the emergence of the cluster of ideas, or rather conceits, about modern Europe's singular place in world history.

In chapter 4 it is **art** that holds our attention, though this is not much of a departure from the concerns of the previous chapter, since the creation of artworks has often been conceptualized as the materialization of the sort of phantasms that occur inwardly in dreams. Over the course of the modern period, as dreams were pushed out of science, politics, and other domains, they were allowed to continue in the creative disciplines. In classicism art had typically, or in its best instances, been seen as a reflection of the proportions and the order that govern the natural world, and thus as part of the same mode of engagement with the world as occurs in science; in romanticism and related movements, however, there opened a gap separating creativity from understanding, and inspiration from love of order. Nowhere is this clearer than in the modern cult of the genius. While ingenium was once understood as a natural disposition to learn, perhaps not equally distributed but also not exceptionally rare, by the late nineteenth century genius came to be seen as something exceedingly rare, a capacity that goes beyond all learning. It is that ability to do things for which no rule can be given, with the resulting work seen not as a failure, but as a new form of success. Against this, there are other competing conceptions of art that are never fully suppressed, such as the archaic view that places art in the same general sphere of activity as ritual (a view with which I acknowledge considerable sympathy), and the conception of art as a vehicle for moral uplift or social progress, as is common in

totalitarian societies where the creation of art becomes co-opted for the purposes of propaganda (for which, by contrast, I avow a proportional antipathy).

In chapter 5 we turn to **pseudoscience**, and so also necessarily to science, as the so-called problem of demarcation between the two domains imposes itself in any attempt to determine what exactly is to count as a spurious, or perverted, or dishonest attempt to present or pursue a given body of knowledge. Here we proceed through case studies, looking particularly at creation “science,” at flat-earth theory, and at the antivaccination movement (consciously leaving out, though only for lack of space, other no less flagrant cases, including, alas, climate-change denialism). This chapter begins, like the introduction, with a discussion of Adorno, in particular his criticism of newspaper horoscopes in 1950s Los Angeles. We also consider Paul Feyerabend’s well-known argument for a maximal permissiveness, promiscuity even, in our understanding of what programs of inquiry and what practices might in principle contribute to the advancement of science. We go on to explore the ways in which both of these analyses fail to capture the rather fine-grained diversity of reasons different groups of people pursue different varieties of inquiry on the margins of, or indeed in straightforward opposition to, establishment science. When we consider this diversity of reasons, we see that some pseudosciences are motivated by substantive differences between the theoretical commitments of their defenders and those of mainstream science, while others in fact have very little to do with defending any particular theory of how the natural world works at all, and are indeed little more than cover for conspiracy theories about how the social world works. Once these distinctions are made, neither Adorno’s austerity nor Feyerabend’s flexibility seems adequate for dealing with the challenges of pseudoscience.

In chapter 6 we take on **the Enlightenment**. Even as I write, there are armies of young people on social media vigorously debating whether this nebulous historical phenomenon was good, or rather bad. Many of them have never read a book about it, drawing what they know out of the strange and distorting filter of “weird political Twitter”

and similar social-media subcultures, where ironic and jarring juxtapositions of text and image are far more persuasive than argumentation and similar online communities, but their strong opinions show at least that it continues to matter today, in a way that it perhaps has not for some time. It matters because its legacy is at a critical juncture and may well not survive. In this chapter we revisit the historical sources, at the moment and in the context of their first articulation, in order to more clearly understand what we have already identified, if cautiously, as the dialectical relationship between Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment. We engage substantively with the critical perspective according to which, from its inception, the Enlightenment has been a parochial project that falsely proclaims its own universal legitimacy, and thus has been hypocritical or at least unforthcoming about the question of who stands to benefit from it, and what a society or an individual must give up in exchange. Of interest to us also is the way in which Enlightenment contrasts with, but also, as Adorno and Horkheimer warned, degenerates into, myth. We must consider carefully what exactly myth is, and whether it is by definition an obstacle to progress, to equality, and to the rational ordering of society. Here, in particular, Giambattista Vico's investigation of the relationship among myth, history, and poetry is particularly useful. Finally we turn to the ways in which Enlightenment values, notably free speech, can be, and in fact have been, perverted and repurposed for decidedly counter-Enlightenment ends. Knowing that this is possible, that this may even be the general tendency of such ideas, we are compelled to consider the legacy of the Enlightenment in a far more cautious way than the usual presentation of the binary options, to accept or reject, would dictate.

In chapter 7 we turn at last to **the internet**, which has been haunting us from the beginning. How, we will seek to determine, has the rise of this new form of communication distorted public debate, and what role does it have in the degeneration of the norms of rational discourse? How, moreover, has its early utopian promise evaporated so quickly, and how could commentators have been so incautious about the extent of the transformations it would bring about? We begin with a historical excursus on what may be called the prehistory of the internet, in

mid-nineteenth-century telecommunications inventions both real and fraudulent, in order to show that, to some extent, the hopes that have been placed in the internet in recent years are not in fact so new, and in order to show that from the beginning the enterprise of connecting the world has been tainted by a certain propensity to deceit and manipulation. We move on to look at some vivid instances of the degeneration of online discourse, particularly in the way in which social media are structurally determined to exacerbate extremisms and to generate stalemates between opposed camps. We devote some considerable time to the ongoing online discussion of the question of the nature of gender identity, as an illustration of the severity of the problem. Mobbing, stalemates, information bubbles, and craven like-seeking are not just local or occasional weaknesses of online discussion; they are built into it, and this brings us to a new and almost paradoxical situation in which the seemingly rational inclination to engage in public debate by sharing ideas and working through arguments can in fact only further contribute to an intrinsically irrational system, can only help feed this new angry beast we have conjured into life.

In chapter 8 we again encounter what only looks like a thorough change of subject, when we turn to **jokes and lies**. The internet threatens to put authors out of work, but also comedians and humorists, as there is a practically infinite supply online of anonymous, spontaneously generated humor that is basically edgier and quicker than most of what is produced by professionals. But this new overabundance is also accompanied by breakneck transformations in political norms, and in ideas about which forms of humor are effective satire, and which ones go too far or warrant that now-common label, both vacuous and vicious at once, “problematic.” In order to motivate this discussion, we go back a few years to 2015, when the work of a group of satirists in Paris was responded to with extrajudicial assassination. The reactions to this event quickly expanded to include the question of the nature of satire: whether one may engage with the world in a special satirical mode characterized by moral and political commitments that differ from those that obtain in the declarative mode. The debate expanded also to include the question of the hypocrisy of Enlightenment values

and the limits of free speech. I describe my initial full-throated defense of the satirists in question in the Paris attack; I then describe how the US presidential election the following year compelled me to rethink the arguments I had previously deployed in defense of the existence of a special satirical mode. This leads to a consideration of the barely-existent subdomain of philosophy that might be called “gelastics,” or the philosophy of humor, in which we pay particular attention to Kant’s attempt to define the joke as a “sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.” So defined, jokes bear a peculiar relationship to logical arguments: they are, so to speak, perverted or curdled syllogisms, where the purpose is not to draw a true conclusion from premises, but to distort our conception of truth by subverting our expectations. They are often dishonest, and yet they continue to bear a special relationship to the truth. This discussion, in turn, leads us to the broader discussion of lies: in particular, the extent to which lying may be deemed irrational, apart from any consideration of its immorality, and also the extent to which the understanding of being honest as consistently making only true claims is adequate. That is, does the difference between the liar and the honest person only come down to the truth-value of their respective statements? This discussion is developed, by now unsurprisingly, against the background of, and with examples drawn from, recent political history.

In chapter 9, we begin to prepare to **die**, with a reflection on what I, inspired by Lev Tolstoy, have dubbed “the impossible syllogism”: the one that leads to a full comprehension of our own mortality. We consider those forms of irrationality that seem to consist, in some way or other, in the denial of our own individual future deaths; we also consider the ways in which this denial at the same time shapes human life and imbues our social existence with value.