

Emancipation through Reason?

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Abstract

Reason, which plays a significant role in the unprecedented progress of human science and technology, is under attack. The criticism of reason includes the reification of reason and the universality of reason. Emancipation from the deformity of reason is usually towards a redirection of reason because it is believed that the fault is not reason itself. However, some critics, such as the postmodernists, reject the practicability of this approach. This essay argues that the culprit is “centralism” in the operation of reason. Reason that embraces egoistic, anthropocentric, and logocentric consciousness implies marginalisation in some way and ultimately must lead to totalitarianism which people fear. Given the operation of centralism, the emancipation process based on reason becomes a process towards human interests (the-wish-to-know) instead of the truth (what-to-know). Accordingly, the primacy of reason does not guarantee access to freedom, truth, or happiness that humans desire.

Key Words: critical theory, emancipation, Habermas, reason

Redirection or Abandonment?

History always proceeds by way of dynamic forces that run counter to each other. Although the unprecedented progress of modern science and technology has boosted material living standards and desire, human consciousness is fraught with overwhelming spiritual alienation. The brilliant achievements of modernity are applauded, but the movement of anti-modernism is rampant in a variety of forms. It is not an overstatement to say that reason, which plays a significant role in technical progress, is under attack.

The criticism of reason is twofold: towards the reification of reason and against the universality (or, rather, the domination) of reason. As for the former, the reification that is a result of the hegemonic power of capitalism and bureaucracy confines reason to instrumentality. This leads to the reification of humans, whose ontological beings are deformed and consequently devalued. The route that is usually taken against the reification of reason (i.e., instrumental reason) is a reasoned critique of reason so that reason can be defended and redirected, in the manner of Jürgen Habermas (1984). The second criticism does not recognise the redirection but offers a thorough objection to the universality of reason in the manner of postmodernists.

It should be clarified here that none of the torrents of criticism of reason are negative towards reason itself; that is, none promotes the negation of the essence of reason. Reason plays an indispensable role in distinguishing humans from other living species and is a significant quality for a human being as a human being. These facts have been so highlighted in history that reason’s grand contribution to human progress is beyond doubt. For those who see reason from a less positive point of view, as postmodernists do, what they negate is not reason itself but its power of domination, which implies the existence of marginalisation. For such critics, marginalisation is related to misunderstanding, negligence, injustice, control, and enforcement. As Habermas (1970) claimed, even an ideal speech situation is still a situation that excludes some voices, which hesitate to think that it is appropriate to participate in a dialogue where reason is presupposed as the universal basis and takes the lead.

No matter what type of stand is taken against reason, the appeal is a release from reason’s confinement (either because of its reification or its universality).

Emancipation from the deformity of reason is usually towards a redirection of reason because it is believed that the fault is not reason itself. What is required for optimists such as Habermas is to reset reason's ideal foundation and return it to its full potential. However, some critics, such as the postmodernists, reject the practicability of this approach. The stand taken in this essay is not the stand of the postmodernists. Instead, suppose that reason has been re-established; the concern is whether this represents an emancipation from reason. Is it possible to emancipate by way of a commitment to a critique of reason? What does emancipation mean? Put another way, is it meaningful to talk about emancipation when it is unknown whether such emancipation offers an existing goal? Before exploring the effect of emancipation from reason by a critique of reason, the re-established implications of reason will be examined.

A Critique of Reason—the Set-Up of Dialogical Reason

It has been suggested that reasonable thought is based on reason because it is believed that the rationality of knowledge and the correctness of judgement arise from a set of critical standards and logical thinking, which are the essential features of reason. Reason has been presented in the form of Cartesian thinking, in which one is a solitary thinker. The Cartesian paradigm was not challenged until early in the nineteenth century, when Hegel noted “the historical and social character of the structures of consciousness” (Habermas, 1984, vii). Similarly, in terms of the involvement of history and social context, critical theorists claim that all descriptions of the social world are, to some degree, ideologically shaped (Gibson, 1986, p.101). Recognising this, Habermas (1970) strengthened the operation of reason as redirected in a communicating dialogue with his four universal validity claims (clarity, *truth*, *sincerity*, and *rightness*). Reason transforms from a solitary meditation to an interactive dialogue.

Through dialogue, which results in reason through ideal communication, the power of ideology can be transcended, and universal truth can come to light. In such circumstances, “getting rid of” the personally and socially ideological context through dialogical reason is thought to be tantamount to “emancipation” from ideological bounds. Is this true? Does dialogical reason reach an emancipated state without external constraints? Ideology is a worldview. Can dialogical reason be, applying Siegel's question (1988) on critical thinking, “world view neutral so that impartial assessment of world views is possible?” Can it be “itself a world view” so that the idea of dialogical reason is itself controversial and demonstrable only to those already committed to the worldview of dialogical reason? If the former is the case, how does dialogical reason become the only type of reasoning that escapes the destiny of being contextually or ideologically situated? If the latter is the case, dialogical reason seems to be contextually confined and fails to emancipate. What is its context?

Reason as a Paradigm

The culprit is “centralism”. Despite its self-claimed universal validity, reason that is operated by a solitary thinker can be dropped into an egoistic consciousness flow because of the influence of contextually involved consciousness. Reason must arise from one's consciousness flow. Although Habermas's critical theory (Merchant, 1996) claimed that the truth can be sought by way of an ideal dialogue in which the operation of reason can transcend solipsism and egoism, such reason is still an anthropocentric trap. There are two reasons for this. First, according to Habermas, knowledge evolves with humans' interests. The thinking in which reason operates moves towards the path of humans' curiosity and concern. There is a centre here. The thinking process progresses towards the sphere around the centre of humans' interests. What is in question now is whether the context of reason involves egoistic consciousness flow or anthropocentric human interests. It is not reason itself but the context that adds non-neutral colour to reason and embraces reason so much that the context cannot be ignored. No mention of reason is meaningful without reference to its inseparable context. Thinking of the operation of reason independent of its context is impractical.

Humans' egoistic and anthropocentric consciousness and reason are characterised as logocentric in Derrida's term (1978). Humans view the world in a logical light in which a sense of coherence and consistency is provided, guaranteeing the feeling that everything makes sense. This sense that inevitably derives from reason is a logocentric worldview. Through the exercise of logocentric reason, knowledge is brought under the rule of universal laws, and order is established. It is not a universal order; it is a special type of order, a logocentric order, in which science can profit by adopting the standards that are set by order. It is assumed that truth can be found along this order because truth is hidden in the track of orders. Logic itself is also anthropocentric.

Logic belongs only to humans and is the distinctive characteristic of humans' reasonable thinking, either in the solitary or the communicative form.

What is wrong with centralism in terms of being egoistic, anthropocentric, and logocentric? Reason has been considered by academics to be a comparatively appropriate paradigm of prediction, interpretation, and even emancipation (for Habermas, for instance). However, this does not mean, as Kuhn (1996) notes, that the paradigm of reason that is currently thought to be better than others brings those who depend on it closer to the truth. Reason that embraces egoistic, anthropocentric, and logocentric consciousness must imply marginalisation in some way and ultimately must lead to totalitarianism, which Barnett (1997, p.24) thinks people fear. Thus, the centralism of reason should be rejected. The progress that is provided by reason is not towards "what-we-do-know" but towards "what-we-wish-to-know" (Kuhn, 1996, p.171) given the operation of centralism. Does this operation of centralism qualify as an emancipation process when the operation of reason is towards human interests (the-wish-to-know) instead of the truth (what-to-know)?

The Unknown about Emancipation

In my view, the meaning of the word "emancipation" is obscure. Literally, "emancipation" refers to a state free from social, political, and moral conventions or restraints. However, this passive definition does not completely make sense. Once free, in which direction does the emancipated state face, or which aim has the state reached? There are two directions (or aims) to steer towards: truth and human happiness. Can emancipation by way of a critique of reason or dialogical reason help us move closer to truth and happiness? As the last paragraph noted, the operation of reason moves towards human interests but not definitely towards the truth or human happiness. Whether the route of this progress that depends on human interests corresponds to the route to truth or human happiness is unknown. As Kuhn (1996) implied, changes of paradigms are closely associated with changes in the interests and thoughts of the human groups or communities, and such changes in the progress of history are not necessarily changes towards the ultimate goals of humans. If Habermas hopes to transcend the power of ideology by the ideal dialogue in which reason operates and to produce insights based on the interests of the member group, what he obtains are changes of paradigms, but not the discovery of truth. At most, reason helps humans free themselves from a social paradigm to another incommensurable social paradigm that they do not know to be closer to the truth or to human happiness. Changing paradigms instead of moving closer to truth or human happiness does not seem to be captured in terms of emancipation.

Conclusion

The statement that one cannot necessarily emancipate oneself by way of a critique of reason does not entail the repudiation of the significance of reason. Cartesian thinking and Habermasian reason have their merits. The model of Cartesian thinking remains even if the Habermasian model challenges it. I am not sure whether it is too much to say, with Feyerabend (1987), that reason can "intimidate man and restrict his free and happy development", but at least it can be said that reason does not guarantee access to freedom or happiness.

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