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Criticism and the Cunning of Reason

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Philosophical thinking is essentially a critical reflection on the nature of reality and our place in it. It is about our understanding of what the world is like and what we, who live in this world, are like. Both our cognitive-epistemic status and our status as normative-evaluative beings are matters of humanity's critical self-understanding. It is the articulation of such self-understanding in a distinctively critical idiom that earns the distinction of philosophy.

If philosophical thought is *constitutively* critical, then one would naturally expect certain central canons of a philosophical critique. But is there really a fixed set of canons that acts as the fulcrum of critical understanding? It is not clear that there is any, because almost every past philosophical critique—whether a metaphysical treatise on the nature of reality, an epistemological enquiry into the structure and extent of our knowledge-claims, or theories on the nature of the moral-evaluative dimension of life—is immediately challenged by a counter-critique that attempts to displace its predecessor with the proclamation of a new epistemic legitimacy.[1] The new critique often justifies its assertion by the use of fresh critical canons which are intended to reject, or at least radically modify, the previous ones.

The history of philosophy is, thus, a record of continual critiques upon other critiques, criticisms after criticisms of discourses of humanity's persistent critical self-understanding. The critical practice of philosophy is essentially contested and interminably renewed. And at its most extreme there is the paradoxical metaphilosophical view that philosophical criticism cannot afford to retain its so-called critical character without assuming uncritically some of its foundational concepts and methods.

Given the fluidity and recalcitrant character of philosophical criticism, which evidently defies any attempt at its canonical description in precise terms, the best that can be done is to identify, in rather loose terms, just a few modes of criticism which have left their marks in the annals of Western thought. From these highlights we may not be able to form a unitary conception of the *critical constitution* of philosophy. But we would surely come to learn something significant about the everchanging critical temperament of philosophy, which in

turn would be a reflection of the nebulous nature of humanity's own reflective self-understanding.

Transcendental Criticism: The Critique of Pure Reason

Whether self-proclaimed or not, no other system of philosophy in the history of the West before Kant is known by the description of 'critical philosophy' than Kant's own. Of course this does not mean that pre-Kantian philosophy is uncritical and therefore not philosophy proper. What is important about Kant's philosophical enterprise is the *kind* of critical turn that it takes during a period of acute epistemological crisis caused by the two destabilising forces of theocentric dogmatism and empiricist scepticism. It is an attempt whereby the critical epistemological project intends to ensure its legitimacy and success.

Legitimacy requires that the project be free of the dogmatic belief, attributed both to traditional and seventeenth century rationalism, that substantive knowledge, characterised by necessity and universality, can be gained by the human reason alone. Success demands that substantive knowledge-claims be immune to the sceptical challenge, recurrent in the arguments of empiricism, that experience, taken to be the only source of knowledge, can never provide epistemic justification for such knowledge claims.

What, then, can be the redeeming path that would steer between the Scylla of rationalist dogmatism and the Charybdis of empiricist scepticism, so that humanity's spirit of critical reflection does not falter between the two horns of a philosophical dilemma? Indeed, it is only critical philosophy, as conceived by Kant, that can pave this liberating path by virtue of an unprecedented criticism of the entrenched theoretical presuppositions both of rationalism and empiricism.

What is dogmatic about rationalism is the belief that there is an ultimate accord or correspondence between the subjective order of ideas and the objective order of things—between thought and reality, in short—and that nothing short of a theological vindication can guarantee the existence of this harmony. In other words, the subjective ideas, or representations, of the objective world can, by necessity, not be systematically false, or deceptive, given the existence of an all perfect God who is the ultimate source of everything. Furthermore, rationalism's conviction that reason itself, unaided by experience, can arrive at non-trivial propositions about objective reality is a vestige of scholastic dogma.

Scepticism is an inevitable consequence of empiricism given its uncompromising belief that experience is the only source of knowledge about the world. Whether it is a claim about there being a

world of enduring physical objects, or of objective causal relation between any two events, or of a substantive self as the bearer of mental impressions and ideas, none of these claims made on the basis of experiential evidence can be any more than risky inferences exceeding the limits of rational justification. For there always remains a yawning gap between what subjective experience furnishes us with, and statements about objective reality we make on subjective experiential bases. Objective reality therefore becomes no more than a name for the psychologically engendered fiction, or a projection of the mind which may actually have no objective correlative whatsoever.

It can now be noticed that while rationalism exaggerates the epistemic power of reason, empiricism underplays the mind's capacity to draw upon itself in its epistemic endeavour, given the needed support of experience. It is a rare critical insight of Kant's to be able to realise the seriousness of these two problems, and to see beyond the disturbingly asymmetrical philosophical landscape drawn by the architects of rationalism and empiricism. Critical philosophy alters that landscape by virtue of a neat meta-cognitive principle proclaimed by Kant: 'Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.'[2]

The first conjunct of this compound sentence is meant to be understood as a critique of rationalism's dogmatic insistence that reason alone can establish universal and necessary non-trivial (that is, empirically contentful) claims to truth. In other words, empirically contentful cognition or thought necessarily depends on the presence to the mind of awareness of sensory data through experience. This stress on sensory awareness seems to concede the strength of empiricism over rationalism. But attention to the second conjunct of the above statement reveals a point that underscores the advantage of rationalism over empiricism.

This point is that sensory-experiential data received by the mind must necessarily be conceptually organised in order to give rise to an experience of an objective world. Empiricism is condemned to lapse into scepticism about an objective world because it looks for the objective principles of conceptual organisation where these cannot be found, namely in the data of experience. Kant's revolutionary contention is that our cognition of an objective world is not a matter of our manner of representation conforming to such a world. On the contrary, it is a matter of the so-called objective world conforming to our manner of representation. It is because the data of experience is organised by certain categories, or *a priori* concepts, such as the concept of an object in general and causal relation between events, both of which are transcendental contributions of the human mind, that we

are able to have experience of an objective world.

Thus, the fundamental idea of Kant's 'Copernican revolution', or his critical philosophy, is the substitution of the principle of a necessary submission of the objective order of reality to the subjective order of the mind for the pre-critical belief in the existence of a final accord—a kind of pre-established harmony —between the subjective and the objective order. The human mind is cognitively structured so as to legislate the terms in which we would know the world, once the mind is fed with sensory input from the world.

Kantian philosophical critique is qualified and distinguished as *transcendental* in the sense of being an enquiry into the subjective, but *a priori*, conditions of possibility of experience and knowledge. A transcendental critique therefore penetrates beneath the one-sided epistemological thinking both of empiricism and rationalism, and thereby articulates a deeply concealed fundamental unity of both empirical and rational reflection. What is so articulated is the basic cognitive structure of the mind that sets the conditions of possibility of objective knowledge. That we can have experience of an objective world only under these cognitive-structural conditions of our subjective constitution is a *transcendental argument* distinctively due to Kant.

The characteristic form of a transcendental argument is that there must be something Y if there actually is something X of which Y is a necessary condition. Crudely put, the transcendental strategy consists in the search for key necessary conditions of some given region of discourse or experience. Philosophical criticism in the mode of a transcendent argument is not confined to Kant. Granted its Kantian provenance, it is manifest in the thoughts of twentieth century philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Strawson. Wittgenstein's critique of private language and scepticism about objective knowledge on the one hand, and Strawson's critique of the vacuity of sceptical doubt about the existence of other minds on the other, are examples of the illustrious legacy of transcendental criticism.

It would appear, from the above account of the transcendental conditions of experience and knowledge, that the activity of reason is governed by these conditions in the assertion of epistemic claims, and that criticism fixes its invigilating eye upon any substantive assertion with a view to ascertaining the fulfilment of these conditions. Kant's criticism of the illusions of speculative metaphysics is precisely the kind of vigilance which demonstrates the transgression of cognitive boundaries of reason. Thus, the critique of pure reason is intended to be understood as ushering in those formal and necessary conditions of knowledge and understanding which define the *ahistorical, context-*

independent and universal structure of rationality as such. Critical reason is construed as pristine, and autonomous or independent of any extra-rational impingement. Hence it is *pure* reason.

It is this pristine image of pure and autonomous reason, structured by *a priori* categories of the understanding, that centrally characterises the Enlightenment project of emancipation—both in theory and practice, in thought and action—from external bonds, oppressive traditions, and generally from all modes of what Kant called 'self-induced immaturity'. The Enlightenment belief is that the critical stance of reason, or the rational human subject, is something to be uncovered through a self-reflective engagement, in the underlying essence of human rationality. When that essential 'light' of reason is shrouded by the external forces of tradition and other non-rational contextual influences, and by the figments of unruly imagination, there is critical blindness, as it were, in the human condition. Enlightenment is therefore *rational enlightenment*, which in turn means that reason understands itself in terms of its true nature, its legitimate scope and necessary limits.

The idea of critical rationality as the mark of both *maturity* and *modernity*—which are also salient marks of the Enlightenment tradition in Western history of ideas—is poignantly discussed in Kant's famous 1784 essay aimed at answering the queston 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant equates Enlightenment with the attainment of maturity through the use of critical reason—that is, taking the responsibility of using one's own critical rationality upon oneself, whereby one engages in the unflinching examination of our most cherished and comforting beliefs and prejudices.

It is a matter of great interest to note that Kant's essay, published more that two centuries ago, has become a most significant point of reference, as well as a point of departure, for the nature and turn of the critical temperament in the twentieth century. One of the last essays of Michel Foucault, which has the same title as Kant's essay, attempts to reinterpret Kant's Enlightenment critique and the nature of modernity-cum-maturity implied in it. Enlightenment is, in Foucault's words, 'the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority... and it is precisely at this moment that the critique is necessary, since its role is that of defining the conditions under which the role of reason is legitimate in order to determine what can be known, what must be done, and what may be hoped.'[3]

This reassertion of the limiting conditions of reason surely indicates the continuity of Foucault's critical stance with Kant's linking of

Enlightenment with critique. But behind this allegiance to the Kantian legacy there lies a considerably altered critical project which redefines, for Foucault, the project of the Enlightenment.

Genealogical and Deconstructive Criticism: The Critique of Impure Reason

That redefinition of the Enlightenment is given in terms of 'the permanent reactivation of an attitude—that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.'[4] This 'attitude', which has to be permanently reactivated, is the attitude of modernity—which is 'a mode of relating to contemporary historical reality.'[5] Foucault takes Kant to have initiated this new type of philosophical interrogation, 'one that simultaneously problematises man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject.'[6] Thus, Kant's essay is perceived as an expression of the belief that one's critical thinking arises out of, and is an attempt to respond to, the historical situation one is in. Critical reason is always and inextricably tied up to the historical moment as a critical response to the latter. It is essentially a 'historical-critical' attitude because reason itself is necessarily conditioned by historicity.

The positive characterisation of the philosophic ethos of critique of the historical present takes the form of a 'practical critique', according to which,

> criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as an historical investigation into the events that have let us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, and saying. In that sense criticism is not transcendental ... (but) genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And ... genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency of that which has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing and thinking what we are, do or think.[7]

Thus, while adopting the archaeological method of articulating the utter historicity of our thought, speech and action, criticism assumes

the form of a genealogical deconstruction of rationalistic pretensions of universality and necessity. In other words, genealogical criticism, guided by an interest in the possibility of transgressing and transforming allegedly universal and necessary constraints, adopts an experimental attitude of repeatedly probing the 'contemporary limits of the necessary' to determine 'what is not or no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects.'[8]

The genealogical critical turn detranscendentalises the so-called pure reason into an intrinsically 'impure' reason, and decentres the rational subject from its Cartesian locus of ahistorical consciousness. The intrinsic impurity of human reason is an inevitable consequence of its embeddedness in culture and society, its entanglement with power and interest, and the historical variability of its categories and criteria—all of which are ultimately a function of the bearer of reason, namely the human subject. Hence there is no way of exploring the nature, scope and limits of human reason other than through a socio-historical enquiry into the social and cultural practices which inexorably enter into the formation of reason.

The critique of impure reason is thus concerned with structures and rules that transcend individual consciousness. In being an enquiry into the socio-culturally generated structures and rules of rational formations, the critique of impure reason is part of the study of culture and society. As a critical endeavour, it aims at enhancing and transforming our self-understanding in ways that affect how we live. For Foucault, such a form of self-understanding—described by him as the 'critical ontology of ourselves'—can be engendered by a mode of critique the primary function of which is to analyse the historical present, and to reveal its fractures and instabilities, that is, the various local and contingent ways in which the present at once limits us and points to the transgression of these limits. Characterised as an ethos, the critical attitude is sustained by 'a philosophic life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.'[9]

We are then introduced to a distinctive kind of critical interrogation within the ambit of the critique of impure reason—namely, critically questioning our existential situation in the living present conceived as 'the present field of possible experiences.' This interrogation inaugurates a critical tradition which is markedly different from another kind of philosophical critique, that is the critique of analysing the transcendental conditions for all possible experience, as undertaken in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Both these traditons are credited to Kant by Foucault in a 1983 lecture of his[10] as 'the two great

traditions between which modern philosophy is divided.'[11] One, which searches for the universal and transcendental conditions by which propositions can be really true or false, is the 'analytic philosophy of truth in general'—which has been the constant target of Foucault's archaeo-genealogical criticism. The other, which is a constantly renewed and 'permanently reactivated' effort to grasp the 'ontology of the present, an ontology of ourselves', is acknow-ledgedly Foucault's own: 'It is this form of philosophy that, from Hegel, through Nietzsche and Max Weber, to the Frankfurt School, has founded a form of reflection in which I have tried to work.'[12]

Foucault's allusion to Hegel is to be understood as the latter's insight, contra Kant, that the fundamental limit to reason is its embeddedness in a historical context. It is this insight into the historical nature of reason, knowledge and even truth, that might be said to begin a different trajectory of critical thought—a critical trajectory of impure reason. Hegel is accredited with having first introduced the idea that reason and truth are to be indexed to the perspective of a history and a culture.

This indexicality, or historical perspectivism, of human reason, knowledge and truth finds a sharper focus in Nietzsche. Nietzsche maintains that perspectival epistemic claims are to be judged, not in relation to the Hegelian postulate of absolute knowledge, but on the basis of their local and pragmatic effects in a specific era. In the absence of an absolute criterion for adjudicating competing truth-claims, what pass for truth are simply beliefs that have been held so long that we have forgotten their genealogy—a point which is clearly indicative of Nietzsche's anticipation of Foucault.

Whereas genealogical-cum-archaeological criticism traces the genesis of the social practices that shape our present condition and then analyses the present to reveal its fractures and instabilities, deconstructive criticism focusses on the same present from the specific angle of the constitution of our rationality by the hidden forces of language. For deconstruction, pure reason is logocentric purity. But logocentric purity in the sense of the potentiality of the human subject to think and mean in a semantically determinate mode is held to be impossible. The so-called rational subject is decentred in relation to the inherent instability and indeterminancy of language. This instability and indeterminancy is due to the fact that signification is always a function of largely unconscious differential relations among signifiers, speakers, hearers, situations, contexts, etc. The process of signification is, in Jacques Derrida's words, a 'play of differences' such that 'no element can function as a sign without referring to other elements' that are not themselves present, and every element is 'constituted on

the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain.'[13]

Derrida's point is that univocity of meaning, understood as a fixed semantic content correlated with a self-same signifier, is impossible to achieve precisely because the tissue of relations and differences inevitably leaves its trace in any signifier. Language, as 'writing', inevitably harbours the possibility of endless 'dissemination' of sense, an indefinite multiplicity of recontextualisations and reinterpretations. We human subjects, far from being masters of what we say, are constituted by the system of language that consists of the differing-and-deferring play of signifiers. The very terms of our existence as subjects are given to us by the system. 'The subject (in its identity with itself, or eventually in its consciousness of its identity with itself, its self-consciousness) is inscribed in language, is a "function" of language, becomes a *speaking* subject only by making its speech conform—even in so-called "creation", or in so-called "transgression"—to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences, or at very least by conforming to the general laws of *differance*.'[14]

The deconstructive critical stance sets the play of *differance* to subvert and unsettle the logocentrism of Western metaphysics—the 'metaphysics of presence' or identity, or the 'philosophy of the same'. *Differance* opens up language and thought to a 'play' that undermines the stability of identity, and therefore the univocity of meaning. The language of philosophy as conditioned by the metaphysics of logocentrism is exposed to be essentially predicated upon the repressive attempt to freeze the play of *differance*, to uproot meaning from the relational and differential movement of signifiers in which language is always enmeshed.

Furthermore, deconstructive criticism aims to bring to light the various paradoxes, internal contradictions, systematic incoherences and inconsistencies which result from the repression of the relentless semantic flux of *differance*. It ceaselessly aims to undermine the philosophical pretense to theoretical mastery by a pure reason that can gain control over its own constitutive conditions, and can attain a definitive grasp of basic meanings and truth. 'It inaugurates the de-struction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the *logos*. Particularlly the signification of *truth*.'[15]

Reason and Its Other

Contemporary Western critical climate is shaped by two currents of thought both pertaining to the plight of human rationality. One current blows in the direction set against the subjectivity-sustained

account of Cartesian-Kantian reason, in search of an alternative rationality still wedded to the emancipatory ambition of the Enlightenment. In this current there is a promise of a fair weather rationality, as it were, under the ideal illumination of reason—that is, the prospect of a form of rationality that does not percolate into the life-world with endangering or exploitative socio-political implications.

The other current turns into a hailstorm, so to speak. Instead of any search for alternatives, its critical onrush culminates in washing away the whole idea of reason and its alternative possibilities. It actually results in countermanding the standing of reason by its radical alterity

The former position is represented by what is known as the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. The critical-theoretic programme of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer[16] is to dislodge the atomistic and disengaged Cartesian subject from its epistemologically privileged centre-position. For the Cartesian rational subject—and the instrumental rationalism of the modern West founded on it—undergirds the ego-centric, domineering and possessive individualism that is held to be responsible for disfiguring modern Western life-world. It is a dialectical critique of the Enlightenment 'rationalisation' process perceived as an instrumental potential for extending human mastery over the physical and social worlds. Instrumental rationality is a rationality of technique and calculation, of regulation and administration, in search of increasingly effective forms of domination.

In a substantially revised form of the critical-theoretic programme, Jurgen Habermas develops the notion of communicative rationality to disabuse reason of pernicious instrumentality. Unlike Cartesian abstract reason, communicative reason is situated reason, as it always arises in specific contexts and is tied up with everyday social practices. This form of rationality is argued to be exempted from the contradictions that beset instrumental rationality, mainly because it is based on communicative *intersubjectivity* rather than individual subjectivity. Especially, reason in this sense is used to gain inter-subjective recognition of validity claims and to arrive at uncoerced agreements concerning defeasible epistemic claims.

The latter—'hailstorm'—view owes its allegiance to a diffuse set of thinkers that can be subsumed, somewhat indiscretely, under the rubric 'post-modernism'. Post-modernism itself is describable in terms of a variegated network of posited concepts and modes of thinking, such as 'post-industrial society', 'post-empiricism', 'post-rationalism', 'anti-foundationalism' and so forth—all seemingly representing the attempt to articulate the sense of a new age dawning. While the contours of the imminent new age are as yet unclear, confused and

controversial, it is reported to be an age 'in which the central experience of the "death of Reason" appears to mark the definitive end of a historical project, whether that project is equated with cultural modernism, the European Enlightenment, or even the entire span of Western civilization since the Greeks.'[17]

The alleged 'death of Reason' has occurred in a kind of explosion of the modern *episteme* in which reason and its subject—as guarantors of cognitive unity and rational totality—are blown to pieces. As Ihab Hassan says, the post-modern movement signifies 'an antinomian moment that assumes a vast unmaking of the Western mind' that results in the 'ontological rejection of the traditional full subject, the *cogito* of Western philosophy.'[18] That individual subject is depicted as unrecognisably submerged in some whole, or generality, such as language, culture, history, power and the like. And the movement of the whole is perceived as being governed by sub-personal or supra-personal forces that flow from beyond the reach of reason.

Both reason and its autonomous subject—whether in Cartesian or Kantian guise—have been irresistibly drawn into the maelstrom of the critique of logocentrism so central to post-modernism. However, this anti-rationalist critique does not owe merely to Derrida's discursive display of the play of *differance* in the maze of language. It in fact is a product of a wide variety of motives, insights and discoveries that have become intermingled and stratified within a complex of critical thoughts. Two important strands from among these deserve discussion.

One prominent strand of this complex is the Freudian psychoanalytic insight into the irrational nature of the putatively rational autonomous human subject. The so-called rational subject is decentred into a nexus of psychic forces of libidinous wish-fulfilment. It is a slave of the forces of passion rather than being a master of these forces. Even the Ego—a meagre remnant of the philosophical subject—is at best a helpless mediator between the conflicting demands of an instinctual Id and an idealised Superego. There always is an alientating *other* of reason within the subject and its reason, and this other never allows the subject to constitute its subjectivity with unalloyed rationality and unyielding autonomy.

The second strand comes from the Wittgensteinian critique of the subject, with its experiences and intentions, as the source or author of linguistic meaning. Wittgenstein criticises the 'name theory' of meaning—according to which linguistic signs acquire meaning as a result of someone (a sign-user) assigning a sign to something given—as a mistaken theory that misrepresents the relation of signification between the sign and the given thing. What this theory fails to realise is that even the simplest designative relation between a term and the

object designated already presupposes the practice of 'following a rule', which sets in motion a 'form of life' appropriate to the 'language-game' of naming and making sense of naming. Given the absolute dependence of the possibility of meaning on the inter-subjective practice of rule-following, the objectivist idea of meaning being an entity, psychological or otherwise, gets dissolved. And so is the idea of the subject being the author of meaning dissolved.

What the Wittgensteinian critique of linguistic meaning leads to is the discovery that the subject of experience and intention cannot play the meaning-constituting role. For linguistic meaning depends on there being a communicative *praxis* of rule-following that pre-exists the intentions and experiences of the subject. The subject as the source or author of meaning is thus decentred by the disclosure of the larger meaning-conferring system—form of life—of inter-subjective agreement and practice.[19]

The Cunning of Reason

Western critical thought, as the above account shows, is sharply divided over the question of the nature and status of human reason. Criticism is evidently a matter of reason, but reason itself is far from being immune to criticism. This dynamic hermeneutic circle of reason and criticism is seen to have revolved on the contested dichotomy of the ahistorical universality of reason on the one hand, and its historical particularity on the other. Which side of this dichotomy is advocated for by a constructive critique of reason determines the direction in which criticism ineluctably sets its motion.

Criticism is launched from an absolute standpoint if reason is believed to be ahistorically universal and culturally neutral. The 'natural light of reason' casts itself upon the temporal flux of events to penetrate through the veil of appearance and reveal underlying timeless truths. Criticism is then a rational unveiling of the temporal order that conceals non-temporal, non-local or context-transcending truth.

When, on the other hand, reason is believed to be historically evolved, culturally constituted and context-bound, criticism takes an essentially perspectival, context-relative, and non-foundationalist stance. Historicism restrains criticism into a critical socio-cultural theory and a critical history. There is then no 'deep' timeless truth to be discovered beneath the apparent order of ever-changing reality. Truth and rationality are not matters of discovery, but social constructions of a humanity involved in various projects of self-understanding within

specific historical conditions. All substantive validity claims are contextualised and fallible. Criticism in this framework sets itself to the task of exposing the universalist pretensions of ahistorical reason, and tracing either the genealogy of absolutist claims or the non-rational as well as irrational forces which underlie the transfiguration of reason as *a priori* and atemporal.

Given the judgement on the nature of reason as either ahistorical or historical, it is predictable whither the wind of criticism blows in the intellectual climate of rational discourse. While Western philosophy ever since Socrates till European modernity of Descartes and Kant has mostly been a history of ahistorical reason in search of immutable truths, both theoretical and practical, the counter-modern philosophical legacy from Nietzsche to the contemporary post-modernists has been a chronicle of reason's historicity, provincialism, disintegrity and cultural embeddedness. Whereas the Socratic-Cartesian-Kantian conception of rationality is considered to be the *one and only* possible form of reason, the post-Nietzschean view turns that allegedly absolute conception of rationality into just *one* possible form that reason *happens* to take in human history.

When the universalist *a priori* conception of reason is historicised, as contemporary post-modernism does, it tantamounts to saying that this conception has a contingent beginning and therefore an actual or possible end. For the post-modernist, it has *actually* ended with the end of modernity, that is, the end of the Enlightenment in the wake of the wholesale critique of the absolutist notions of reason, truth and freedom. The traditional philosophical investigation of the nature of human knowledge is then viewed as the study of certain historically situated modes of action and interaction—a kind of study that draws upon the usual empirical-cum-hermeneutic method of cultural anthropology and intellectual history. Explicating rationality and epistemic authority is neither a matter of the Cartesian quest for self-validating reasons, nor of Kantian transcendental arguments for *a priori* categories of understanding. Rather, as Richard Rorty argues, it is a matter of providing ethno-historiographic accounts of knowledge-producing activities.[20]

Historicism of the kind adumbrated above signals the death of philosophical rationality as it is traditionally understood. What could be a greater critical assault on the hallowed reason of philosophy than this? Thus, philosophy today is perceived to be at a critical turning point, one perspicuously marked by an intensified historical and cultural self-consciousness. When the rational subject of knowledge is no longer viewed as solitary, disengaged and disembodied, and if

structures of reason are no longer considered timeless, necessary and unconditioned, then philosophy naturally gets redirected towards a kind of socio-historical enquiry.

Notwithstanding the persuasiveness of the claim that human rational capacities are invariably tied to culturally variable and historically changeable forms of social practice, historicism as a form of radical contextualisation of reason, truth and knowledge may itself be symptomatic of critical blindness. Even if absolute context-transcendence of the kind which enables reason to have a God's eye point of view—what Thomas Nagel calls 'the view from nowhere'[21] — is a sheer transcendental illusion, there may still be room for speculating about a lesser form of rationality that retains something of the transcendent, regulative and critical force of the ahistorical conception of reason. That reason is historically situated does not necessarily mean that rationality has no constitutive constraint whatsoever to govern the operation of reason across changes in history.

Habermas's critique of communicative action is a significant step in this direction of a quasi-transcendental form of rationality. This critique offers an alternative to radically contextualist historicism not by denying the situatedness of reason, but by illuminating certain essential features of the communicative situation that are invisible to the contextualist gaze. While communication always arises in specific contexts and is tied up to everyday social practices, the validity claims involved in comunicative interaction transcend the contingency of their genesis. Despite being *immanent* in particular language games and forms of life in which communication takes place, the validity claims claim a validity that *transcends* any and all contexts. Habermas illustrates the idea of communicative rationality that neatly avoids the charge of ahistoricity without having to forego universality and necessity altogether.

Habermas is not alone in the contemporary scenario in defending a critique of a diluted form of pure reason that retains universality and necessity without losing situatedness. Hilary Putnam also pronounces that from the possibility of reaching inter-subjective linguistic understanding, we can read off a concept of situated reason that is given voice in validity claims that are both context-dependent and transcendent. In his own words: 'Reason is, in this sense, both immanent (not to be found outside of concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions.'[22] To this Habermas adds his own words in a succinct paraphrase: 'The validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times,' but in each actual case the claim is raised here and now, in specific context, and accepted or rejected

with real implications for social interaction.'

Critical rationality of the Habermas-Putnam variety carves out an intermediate niche between the *a priori* 'sanctity' of pure reason and the *a posteriori* 'profanity' of impure reason—a space between Kantian modernism and contemporary post-modernism. It entails a conception of reason as something inherently rooted in, and structured by, *de facto* forms of life. And yet, reason in this sense is not so thoroughly encumbered in the contingencies of living contexts as to become bereft of any *de jure* potential—namely, the regulative role of critically reviewing the practices of the life-world and rational formations within it. Thus, seen from both *de facto* and *de jure* perspectives, reason strikes as Janus-faced.

But what exactly is the argument for the allegedly unencumbered 'face' of reason? What is it that drives the argument against the radical historicist or contextualist conception of the unmitigated surrender of reason to the objective forces of socio-cultural flux? I think that the argument is available, rather ironically, in the historicist counter-argument itself. For how could the historicist engage in a critique of impure reason, in criticism of theories of pure reason, were there no context-neutral, trans-historical rational vision to act as a transducer for that critique? Surely, it at least takes *some* amount of unalloyed reason to be able to say that all rationality is alloyed with contextuality. Without this minimal purity of reason, the radical contextualist's unmitigated historicism would be vulnerable to a self-referential paradox, or what Habermas terms 'performative self-contradiction.'[24]

It therefore seems to me that there is something peculiarly cunning about human reason: it is smart enough to outsmart itself, especially when if tends to take refuge in the complacency of historicity. Indeed, what constitutes the fulcrum of rational criticism—any critique of reason —can be indicated in terms of an ever-redeeming paradox: *reason is always one step ahead of itself.* Whatever form of rationality reason might take in the undulating movement of human history, it never fails to recognise the contours of its temporalised identity. Sooner or later, it does come to some self-understanding, even though actually acquiring such self-understandings means endlessly spinning rationality stories.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In 'Does Political Philosophy Still Exist?'—a famous paper included in Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society,* Second Series (Oxford:Basil Blackwell, 1962)—Isaiah Berlin comments that 'the history of thought and culture is, as Hegel showed with great brilliance, a changing pattern

of great liberating ideas which inevitably turn into suffocating straightjackets, and so stimulate their own destruction by new emancipating, and at the same time, enslaving conceptions' (p.17).

2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1929), B75/A51, p. 93.
3. Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 38.
4. 'What is Enlightenment?', p. 42.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
6. *Ibid.*, p.42.
7. *Ibid.*, p.40.
8. *Ibid.*,p.39.
9. *Ibid.*, p.50.
10. 'An abridged version of this lecture, which had first appeared in *Magazine litteraire* 207 (May 1984), pp. 35-39, is reprinted in Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, tr. Alan Sheridan *et al.*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York & London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall Inc., 1988), under the title 'The Art of Telling the Truth', pp. 86-95.
11. 'The Art of Telling the Truth', p. 95.
12. *Ibid.*, p.95.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, tr. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 28.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 15.
15. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 10.
16. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Englightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).
17. Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, tr. David Midgley (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 36.
18. Cited in Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, p. 38.
19. Both these strands—Freudian and Wittgensteinian—are discussed in Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, pp. 57-71.
20. Rorty's 'anti-epistemology' view is elaborately developed and defended in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979).
21. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
22. Hilary Putnam, 'Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized', in K. Baynes, J. Bohman and T. MaCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987), p. 228.
23. Jurgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, tr. W.M. Hohengarten (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 139.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 135.