

Speculative Philosophy and the Tyranny of the Practical

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In *The Function of Reason* A.N. Whitehead claims that “History discloses two main tendencies in the course of events. One tendency is exemplified in the slow decay of physical nature... The other tendency is exemplified by the yearly renewal of nature in the spring, and by the upward course of biological evolution.”¹ The ‘downward’ tendency is towards increasingly stable states of equilibrium (as exemplified in the Second Law of Thermodynamics), while the ‘upward’ tendency is towards increasing orders of complexity (as exemplified in biological forms of life). These tendencies can be found at all levels of being, from the day-to-day cycles of an individual organism to the evolution of the cosmos. Viewed cosmologically, for example, the current cycle or phase of the universe suggests that the ‘downward’ tendency is most prominent, but we can expect the upward tendency to have been more prominent in the distant past and to become more prominent again in the future.²

The upward tendency is manifest in the *active* manner in which living things relate to their environments; organisms not only adapt to their environments, they also “have progressively undertaken the task of adapting the environment to themselves.” This active *transformative* aspect of things is the expression of a “three-fold urge: (i) to live, (ii) to live well, (iii) to live better.” This three-fold urge is a central feature of the *art of life*: “*first* to be alive, *secondly* to be alive in a satisfactory way, and *thirdly* to acquire an increase in satisfaction.”³

It is here that Reason enters the picture, for the principal “*function of Reason is to promote the Art of Life.*”⁴ Reason accomplishes this by serving as “the self-discipline of the originative element in history. Apart from the operations of Reason, this element is anarchic.”⁵ It is

¹A.N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (1929; reis., Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 1.

²Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 24-25.

³Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 8.

⁴Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 4.

⁵Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 1.

through the originative, anarchic aspect of being that novelty enters the world. We see this in evolution, but it is perhaps most vividly expressed in the processes of technological innovation and development where novel possibility conditions are enabled or brought into being by newly-produced actualities.⁶ The anarchic *and* the regulative element are *both* at work in the world in a conjunctive sense that “cannot be torn apart.”⁷ If the anarchic element were removed, the world would quickly sink into the vacuity of mere repetition; if the regulative element were removed, the world would sink even more quickly into the empty vacuity of chaos or nothingness.⁸ Since “we are in the world and the world is in us”⁹ then both elements are at work within the operations of Reason as well.¹⁰

According to Whitehead, Reason “is a second-order type of mentality. It is the appetite of appetitions.”¹¹ Reason is both critical and *self*-critical, regulative and *self*-regulative; it “is a factor in experience which directs and criticizes the urge toward the attainment of an end realized in imagination but not in fact.”¹² One of the primary roles of Reason is to *survey and critically examine* the possibility conditions that are open to us at any given time (i.e. “foresight”) and to *actualize* some selected subset of those possibility conditions through self-regulated *methods of action* (i.e. “conduct”).¹³ This means that Reason is intrinsically oriented toward the possible *and* the actual. The emphasis on the possible is expressive of Reason’s ‘transcendent’ “godlike” orientation, while the emphasis on the actual is expressive of its immanent, “animal” orientation. The stability-oriented, naturalistic emphasis on actualization through some “immediate method of action” is *Practical Reason*, while the novelty-seeking, “godlike” emphasis on the possible is *Speculative Reason*.

Where Practical Reason is aimed primarily at developing and maintaining the conditions for living and living well¹⁴ (at least for those whose lives are served by those conditions), Speculative Reason is oriented more towards novel possibility conditions with the aim of living better by advancing our *understanding* of the world and our place within it.¹⁵ In its critically reflective aspect Speculative Reason is aimed at uncovering the limits inherent within a prevailing form of life with the aim of transcending those limits and redirecting our atten-

⁶Philip Rose, “The Anthropocene, Cultural-Technological Life, and the Ecological Turn: Rethinking Nature and Humanity via a Real Relation to the Possible.” *Analecta Hermeneutica*, Vol. 10, 2018, 6-12.

⁷Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 30.

⁸Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 33-34.

⁹A.N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (1938; reis., New York: The Free Press, 1966), 165.

¹⁰Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 32-34.

¹¹Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 33.

¹²Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 8.

¹³Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 13, 26.

¹⁴Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 37.

¹⁵Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 37-38.

tion to aspects of phenomena that may be obscured or excluded by prevailing methodologies and practices.¹⁶ While Speculative Reason is oriented primarily toward expanding our *understanding* of the world and our place within it, in doing so it may also open the door to novel possibilities of life satisfaction that are unattainable within the prevailing form of life.¹⁷ It is this *promise of creative advance*, i.e. the *growth of understanding* (and the novel conditions of life-satisfaction that may follow from it), that lies at the heart of Speculative Reason.¹⁸

Viewed historically, Practical Reason is more venerable, having a history that extends well back into human evolution. By contrast, Speculative Reason is relatively young, coming onto the scene in a historically dramatic way with the rise of highly abstract forms of thought.¹⁹ It is with the rise of Speculative Reason that we see the birth of “philosophy as concerned with the discipline of the speculative Reason.”²⁰

The stabilising work of Practical Reason is a *vital* element in human life. Not only does it play the life-enhancing role of developing and sustaining the various possibility conditions that are inherent within a given methodology or form of life, but the stability conditions it promotes also help open up new possibilities for Speculative Reason to work upon for the advancement of understanding.²¹

Practical Reason has “a short range of forecast” accompanied by an “active interest in restraining curiosity within the scope of its method.”²² As such, Practical Reason can become “obscurantist” and “dogmatic,” defending some prevailing form of life by appealing to the successes of its dominant methodologies and practices.²³ Speculation becomes decried as “tenuous, unpractical, and a waste of time.”²⁴ The result is a seemingly ‘naturalized’ form of life marked both by an exaggerated sense of self-certainty and a “relapse into the routine of successful methodology.”²⁵ Employed in this manner, Practical Reason can be dangerous, functioning in an obscurantist and dogmatic fashion in the “slavish conformity” to the habituated methods of some accepted form of life;²⁶ Speculative Reason comes to be viewed with suspicion, with the conditions for its possibility being either devalued or denied. Such dogmatic use of Practical Reason expresses the ‘downward’ tendency inherent in things. In

¹⁶Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 15, 46, 51, 65-67.

¹⁷Philip Rose, *On Whitehead* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002) 85-88; Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 71-76.

¹⁸Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 9-10, 65-66, 81-82.

¹⁹Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 40-41.

²⁰Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 41, 51, 66-68.

²¹Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 37; Rose, *On Whitehead*, 85-88.

²²Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 17.

²³Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 43, 50.

²⁴Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 76.

²⁵Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 58.

²⁶Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 18-20, 33-34.

seeking to preserve and maintain some given set of stability conditions, it can end up disguising what is in reality “a relatively slow process of atrophied decay.”²⁷

The transition from one form of life to another need not be good in an absolute sense, and usually comes at a cost: those who lived well under one system may have reduced satisfaction in another; one system may downplay phenomena, values, etc. that are vital in another; novel systems of explanation may discard principles or elements from a previous system as irrelevant or redundant for attaining selected ends, and so on. Such transitions can have unexpected outcomes. The practical turn in modern science and the rise of the techno-scientific form of life, for example, have enabled beneficial results for many, but its shortcomings are becoming more clearly manifest, e.g. in strained relations with our environment.

The dangerous side of Practical Reason is now manifest, I want to suggest, in the uncritically presumptive, dogmatic adherence of many to the *deflationary metaphysics* of the modern ‘scientific’ world view. The metaphysical deflation of all principles of determination to material conditions in lawfully ordered efficient relations may have given rise to great discoveries in physics, chemistry, and so on; but this has come at a cost: 1) Phenomena of a *formative* (e.g. synthetic), *final* (e.g. end-oriented) and *transcendent* character cannot be adequately explained and understood within the modern deflationary model of Nature, and so are *explained away* as evolutionarily inherited *anthropomorphic* projections, 2) A corresponding inability to explain and understand the *self-correcting*, *self-transcending* capacity of Speculative Reason has resulted in the *reduction of Reason* to its *one-sided immanent*, ‘*naturalistic*,’ *Practical* function.²⁸ We see this in the tendency to reduce mentality, purposiveness, and other prominent features of experience to efficient operations within the brain (which seems akin to reducing the operations on a computer screen to efficient relations between its pixels). We also see it in the tendency to reduce evolution to the ‘fortuitous’ outcomes of efficient relations; a presumptive refusal to recognize the *active* role that organisms play in shaping their environment as anything more than the ‘fortuitous’ inheritance of some ‘fortuitous’ balance of mechanistic forces that is itself the ‘fortuitously’ accumulated outcome of another long and complex series of ‘fortuitous’ efficient relations. Put simply, the pendulum has swung too far to the ‘practical’ side of things. This is manifest in various ways, e.g. reducing things to what they do, reducing ideas and intentions to material practices, reducing the value of education to market metrics, and so on.

The *exaggerated* importance assigned to practical measures, as the distorted expression of the venerable and vital work of Practical Reason, is the long-developing outcome of an inadequate metaphysics. To counter this, we need to promote a renewed respect for Speculative

²⁷Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*. 82.

²⁸Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, 28-30; *Modes of Thought*, 148-152.

Reason.²⁹ This means developing a renewed acceptance of the traditional view of Reason as a *self-correcting, self-transcending* capacity whose reach is not limited to any particular evolutionarily inherited linguistic framework or conceptual scheme. It also means fostering a renewed respect for the classical idea of contemplation, i.e. *understanding the world and our place within it for its own sake*, as something that is worthy and good *in-itself* and not merely as a measure of Practical Reason in its dangerous, one-sided sense. It is time to restore the pendulum to a more balanced state.

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²⁹Arran Gare, "Speculation." In: Glăveanu V. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-98390-5_160-1