Reason, Delusion, and "The Good"

By Hubertus Fremerey

We humans are thinking animals, and because of our thinking we are forced to supplement the natural habitat with a mental and spiritual habitat that would guide our thinking and behaviour. Thus Kant wrote an essay "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" ("Was heisst, sich im Denken orientieren?") and Heidegger published a series of lectures under the same title. Such a question would not be applicable to animals. Religions, philosophies and sciences are all offering some frames of reference for the confused minds of thinking humans, and they all are at the same time mental constructs of humans in a similar way as houses and cities are physical constructs for humans to live in. Thus the problem of reason is to critically justify and to improve those mental constructs.

What we have to study then are our ways of constructing our worlds, our "ways of world-making" (Nelson Goodman). We have to understand the ways of mentally constructing our world to understand what is good and reasonable and what is not. And we have to understand what it means to speak of "good" and "reasonable" as different from "bad" and "unreasonable". Just to give a hint: The mental constructs of neurotic and psychotic, of manic and delusional persons to make the world around look consistent to them are in a sense helpful to the constructors but detrimental at the same time, since those constructs are offering guidance but are misguiding. In this sense, Hitler has been a misguided and misguiding guide for his followers. But what about Jesus, who said of himself "I am the way, the truth, and the life"? Did he misguide his followers?

Those are some of the difficult questions surrounding the problems of reason. And what is a problem of reason anyway? From a clinical point of view we may say that, if someone has no problems with him-/herself and not with his world, he/she could be called "mentally sane". But from a spiritual point of view the same person could be said to be mentally "deaf and ill and insensitive" exactly because she has no problems. To be at ease with oneself and the world may be a sign of being ill. Thus the concept of reason is a crocodile's pond of problems.

While the Hegelian approach to the concept of reason starts from the primary givens, the elementary "sense data", to proceed to the concept formation of "objects" (which are much more than mere sense-data as every programmer of artificial intelligence knows) and further on to "understanding", i.e., apprehending

the web of interconnections between objects up to the highest level of "thinking and reasoning", i.e., making sense of those interconnections, my own approach is very different.

I start from four points which together form what I call "the tetraeder of reason", but instead of being a ladder from the most primitive to the most advanced level of awareness my tetraeder connects four different practical concerns of our thinking. There is not a first, second, third and fourth point, since in a tetraeder all points are equivalent. A tetraeder is nothing but the four interconnected points. In my approach those points represent four different realms of thinking :

– FT = logical and mathematical formal thinking

– ET = ethical and interpersonal thinking

– PT = practical and creative thinking

– ST = spiritual and metaphysical thinking

In the tetraeder no point is superior and not one can be omitted. F.i., religious and mathematical thinking have been strongly interrelated not only in the views of Plato and Pythagoras, but even in the much older philosophies of the ancient Orient. And of course, ethics has always been strongly interconnected with religion, but with practical concerns too. Etc..

What I was interested in is a different methical approach to the objects of thinking in all four cases. Formal problems of logics and math are different from problems of human interaction and from problems of interacting with physical objects and the environment. The concern of the artist is to a degree formal, to a degree social, to a degree material, and to a degree spiritual. Spiritual does not always mean religious. We use to speak of the "spirit" of a great work of art or of music.

Now you see the intention of my approach: I wanted to make the constructive character of our thinking and arguing visible. The Hegelian "ladder" of sense-certainty, perception, understanding and reason is a typical analytical approach, but it does not show me the struggling humans trying to make sense of the world around. The Hegelian approach may be seen as an analytical prerequisite and propaedeutic, but I am interested in the practical consequences of thinking and reasoning. The Hegelian schematism does not tell me the difference between smart and dull thinking, between correct and delusional thinking, between madness and mental sanity etc.. To know the physical principles of building houses does not

build a single house, let alone a truly great edifice that is admired over centuries like the parthenon of Athens or the Taj Mahal.

So what is it that makes the difference between reason and madness, between good and less good arguments, or between understanding humans and understanding technical devices and processes? Formally it is all about understanding and reasoning, but understanding humans and understanding technical devices are two very different tasks, and reasoning about a chess-game is very different from reasoning about human rights and obligations as in the "Antigone" of Sophocles.

As I said, the "frames of reference" provided by human cultures in the forms of religions, philosophies and scientific theories are human collective artifacts to enable meaningful explanations to what we humans do and think and why we do and think it. During the Occidental confessional wars in the century between ca. 1550 and 1649 one part of the Western population referred to the Roman Catholic frame of reference, while the other part referred to the Protestant frame of reference to fight one of the most terrible sequence of regional wars. Today we do not understand those conflicts in their old religious context, but we have had similar conflicts only 80 years ago between "rightist", "leftist", "conservative" and "liberal" political factions. Fundamentally the Western wars from 1914 until 1989 were another variety of "religious" wars between "frames of reference", when the "confessions" were communisms, fascisms, conservatisms and liberalisms in different shades.

The "framers" were not right or wrong, they only thought the different frames incompatible and tried to fight it out in a similar way as did those religious confessions during the Baroque era. Thus people do not defend some isolated arguments but they defend the whole context that makes sense of that argument. Quite often the context defines what is a fact: The notions of sin and grace are meaningless outside the Christian theological context. Thus what was a matter of life and death in the Reformation Wars is without any relevance to most people today, while the notion of "social justice" which was so important in the ongoing war between socialism and liberalism during the last some 150 years was of much less relevance 500 years ago. This means that the notions of sin and grace and social justice and "class struggle" and several others are not empirical but are "social and theoretical constructs". If a theory or a weltanschauung as Christianity or Marxism fades away, the key-concepts or "key-words" characterizing the theory or the weltanschauung vanish too or become mere catchwords. In this sense the objects in the world of humans are not timeless givens but they come and go. Only a few very general concepts like truth, freedom, beauty, justice, health, mental

sanity, and some others remain always around, but they change their content over the years and in different cultural context.

This observation seems to support the thesis that "philosophy is a form of art". While I share this view to a degree long since, one has to be careful here. Science tries to be objective, claiming its results as true for everybody and every time as long as they are not refuted by new evidence. Art on the other hand is essentially subjective, the expression of a personal mind. So if, say, Durer, Rembrandt and Monet could sit before the same landscape at the same time, they would deliver three very different pictures of this landscape. A great painter is not a camera but a creative mind.

But philosophy is not only subjective and expressive, but like science it also tries to give a true picture of the world "as it is". While from an Aristotelian point of view, Plato has been a philosophical poet, the Aristotelian approach was not "wrong". Both philosophers were sincere, but as a tutor of Alexander the Great Aristotle had a more practical view of matters political and on statecraft than Plato. In a similar way, the philosophical work of St. Thomas or that of Hegel is no less philosophical than that of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or Heidegger. But you cannot erect a system of law and government and economy on the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, or Heidegger.

On the other hand, the law and government and economy cannot become sciences, because all three remain mental and cultural constructs comparable to technical constructions like machines or edifices. In this sense – as human artifacts – they could be called "artforms". But a painting or a poem, while being a work of human ingenuity, is different in character from a machine or an edifice, which have to respect the laws of physics to be useful. And like Aristotle, St. Thomas and Hegel (and several others) I am very much interested in these technical aspects of a philosophy that would be helping with our current global problems. Thus I reject the alternative of a philosophy being subjective and expressive on the one hand, and a science being objective on the other hand. Perhaps put it thus: Every work of art is automatically an artificial creation of humans, but not every artificial creation of humans is a work of art. F.i., a computer or a space-station or a political constitution are clearly artificial, but they are not meant to be works of art. In this sense I see every philosophy as artificial, but not generally as a work of art – and not a work of science either.

Let's look again at the tetraeder: It is first of all a very practical scheme. While the buildings-engineer has to apply the laws of physics, the architect is first of all an

artist. But they need each other. Humans have to solve practical problems but not as artists alone, but including practical considerations of a technical and economical sort and they have to take into account insights from psychology and sociology and history and systems theory and mathematics among others.

Science can never tell us what to do, since science is about facts and consequences and not about human goals and values. But since we want to build a world for us humans to live in, goals and values matter and thus our future cannot be left to the sciences. This explains why all state-utopias from Plato up to this day are nonsense. They are static technical constructs, not living and growing organisms built by living, learning and struggling humans to live there.

I now turn to the topic of this essay: 'Reason, Delusion, and "The Good"' – What does it mean?

Applying reason to our world means applying the concepts and theories that we have developed over the centuries to cope with countless visible and invisible problems. Building houses and towns and crafting clothing and pottery and metallic objects seems straightforward. Likewise works of art seem just a matter of talent like any craftsmanship. But to establish law and social order is of a very different character, and even more so is establishing a religion and those other frames of reference I hinted at. By what arguments do we call any such frame of reference "reasonable"? A social order may be something humans deliberate and eventually agree to. This would be the idea behind the concept of "discourse analysis" according to Habermas. But who invented and introduced religions and weltanschauung? Those were not the results of deliberating committees, but of the geniuses inventing and introducing them. Thus Buddhism was invented by the Buddha, Platonism was invented by Plato, Christianity was introduced by the Jewish rabbi Jesus and then essentially formed by St. Paul. Lutheranism was invented by Luther, and Marxism was invented by Marx and then transformed by Lenin.

The interesting point in all this is a strange weakness of the idea of deliberations. Not one of those great founders (to whom add Confucius and Muhammad and Calvin and several others) was interested in a committee or in discourses. We tend to overestimate councils. But what made those great ideas great? They were able to provide an intelligible form to free floating latent ideas. When Christianity entered the world of European Antiquity it was heard by the masses of uprooted soldiers roaming the roman empire and it was ethically attractive to the erudite elites that had read Plato and Aristotle and the works of the Stoics and the

Epicureans. But this was philosophy, while the religious message was personal, and this made the difference. In a sense the personal voice of Christ that could be heard from the Gospels combined with the intellectual appeal of the philosophies of Plato and the Neo-Platonists and the Stoics. But nowhere was a committee needed to bring this effect about. Likewise the Communist Manifesto and the model of the mechanisms of history suggested by Marx resonated with large parts of the working masses in Europe around 1900. Both Christianity and Marxism were great visionary frames of reference that caught the imagination of the masses and the elites at the same time. To call this effect "irrational" ignores the fact that humans need visions and goals and not technical details. And those visions provided stuff for the intellectuals and theologians to work on.

Skeptics would of course call Christianity and Marxism (and Buddhism and Platonism and Protestantism and some other great visions) "delusional". But even liberalism and capitalism could be called thus. All those visions look "reasonable" and attractive to even bright minds. Christianity entered the world as a "liberation movement" in the same way as did "Enlightenment" with Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant and Hegel later. Marxism and liberalism are but the twin children of Enlightenment philosophy. They all offered "reasonable" frames of reference where humans could understand and justify goals and values. Humans as free thinking beings are fundamentally ethical and responsible, asking for moral guidelines that no science can provide. For moral beings no science could replace religion or philosophy since no science knows of goals and values. To call the study of law and the state a science is misleading, since it is only stating that arguments in jurisdiction should be consistent. But they always remain human mental constructs, they cannot have the same status as natural laws. To think otherwise would be "objectification" and a form of ideology. Any system of judiciary and polity is as artificial as a house or a town.

But what about the notions of "delusion" and "the good" in the title of this essay? As I said before, any grand design of a frame of reference, any religion and weltanschauung is in a sense delusional, since it cannot be proven to be "correct" any more than a work of art or of architecture could be proven correct. We may call a mathematical solution or a physical theory "correct", or some factual assumptions, but never a mental or social construct, which is always arbitrary. Neither the worldview of Christianity nor that of Enlightenment or of Marxism or of Liberalism or of any other such "frame of reference" is or could be "correct". In this sense they are all "works of art". But they are not mere expressions of the mind, but have to stand the test of time and of practical applicability. And here the notions of "delusion" and "the good" enter our discussion.

Some people are full of fears and cling to a certain explanation of the world with all their might like a scared child clings to its teddy. Strong people are always open to new experiences, to learning and adapting. Weak and timorous people are rigid with fear and defending their frame of reference like their home and husband. In this way any weltanschauung can become delusional and a dangerous obsession. This pertains to religious sects and to the admirers of those "great helmsmen" (like Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong and some others) and to those people who fell to Gnostic and Kabbalistic and Theosophic constructs or to paranoias and conspiracy theories. They all are defending a frame of reference like a home.

This is not automatically the fate of the religious mind! For many Christians including St. Paul and Luther and Ignatius, the Gospel was a source of joy and liberty for all humans. Any weltanschauung is an instrument and as such it is ambivalent, i.e., it can be a source of joy and liberty or it can be a source of arrogance, hypocrisy and spiritual paralysis. That applies to Jewish, Islamic, Marxist and other frames of reference likewise. It's the difference between a car to explore the world and a tank to defend your life. Thus delusion is a dead and rigid form of reason.

And now finally, what is the meaning of the "good" in the title of my essay? Remember that even the Great Inquisitor and Robespierre and Hitler and Lenin and Stalin and Pol Pot were – and even honestly – fighting "for the good of humankind". But they all did fight in a state of delusion, not in a state of true reasonableness. But "the good" – even for all humankind – is a meaningful goal. Not the idea in itself is problematic, but the mechanical approach to a goal whose intricacies and pitfalls were too complicated for the minds of the villains just cited.

To give at least a hint at where I see the important trait of a good solution, I consider the concept of mental sanity: What does it MEAN to be mentally sane if it is NOT "being fit to cope with everyday's problems"? Whatever Jesus may have been, he was said to be "the light shining in the darkness", and he said of himself to be "the way, the truth, and the life", and many millions of believers have seen him thus. Would anybody say this of Hitler? What are we speaking of in situations where we speak of mental sanity? It is not a clinical term in this context but a philosophical and anthropological one.

I think that "to be a good human" means to be constructive and supporting. "To be a bad human" would then mean to be "destructive and weakening, even killing." Jesus was a constructive person, Hitler was a destructive person. Jesus was giving from his abundance of love, Hitler was devouring the adoration of his followers to

fill his yawning lack of love and he was greedy for power to silence his deep fears. Heidegger was an admirer of Hitler, and Heidegger too was full of fears and was lacking love. I think that somewhere in this direction the answer to the question of "the good" could be found. Perhaps read the famous "story of the antichrist" by Vladimir Soloviev and ask yourself what in the opinion of Soloviev made the outstanding personality he depicted a model of the antichrist (http://www.goodcatholicbooks.org/antichrist.html).

And one more hint: What is a common trait in Hitler, Voldemort, and Sauron?

My "tetraeder-model of applied reason" – which is of course very similar to the classical set of logics, ethics, episteme and metaphysics – is designed to highlight the instrumental character of reason as compared to any mere intellectual concept. In this I follow the approach of "lebensphilosophy", the interpretation of thinking as instrumental to cope with all problems of life, not only with logical problems. In this view – that was held by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and by Marx and Freud among others – delusions and superstitions and ideologies and taboos can be strong means to make life bearable. In this sense, when somebody almost desperately told me "But the most important goal of any philosophy is truth!" I answered : "No, the most important goal of a living being is survival!"

Well, we all try to make sense of the world, of our experiences in the world. But since we are ethical beings responsible for the good use of our freedoms, we are only to a degree interested in scientific facts. We are much more interested in justifying our deeds and thoughts before ourselves and other humans. But science cannot justify our goals and values. We could justify certain behaviour to become wealthy or healthy, but we could as well justify to become saintly beggars like the Buddha or St. Francis. No science could tell us what to do. Thus an ethical frame of reference is different from a scientific frame of reference, and reason "as such" does not tell us much about this difference. Only when reason is seen as instrumental, as a instrument that can be applied in a wise or in a silly way, in a constructive or in a destructive way, in a liberating or in a closing way, in a creative or in a schematic way will we become aware of the full potential of reason in all its forms and applications. To understand this in all its aspects is what I am interested in.

The search for truth is just one of many goals of reason and not the most important. The search for sense and meaning in our being in this world is of more importance, since as responsible beings we have to justify our moral existence before ourselves and our conscience. Life is not a logical problem but is asking for creative answers

that no science could provide. This makes the concepts of reason and unreason that difficult.

Of course there is much more to the problems of reason, delusion and "the good". I just tried to make some important aspects visible again.

© Hubertus Fremerey 2016.

Email: yodafrem@gmail.com