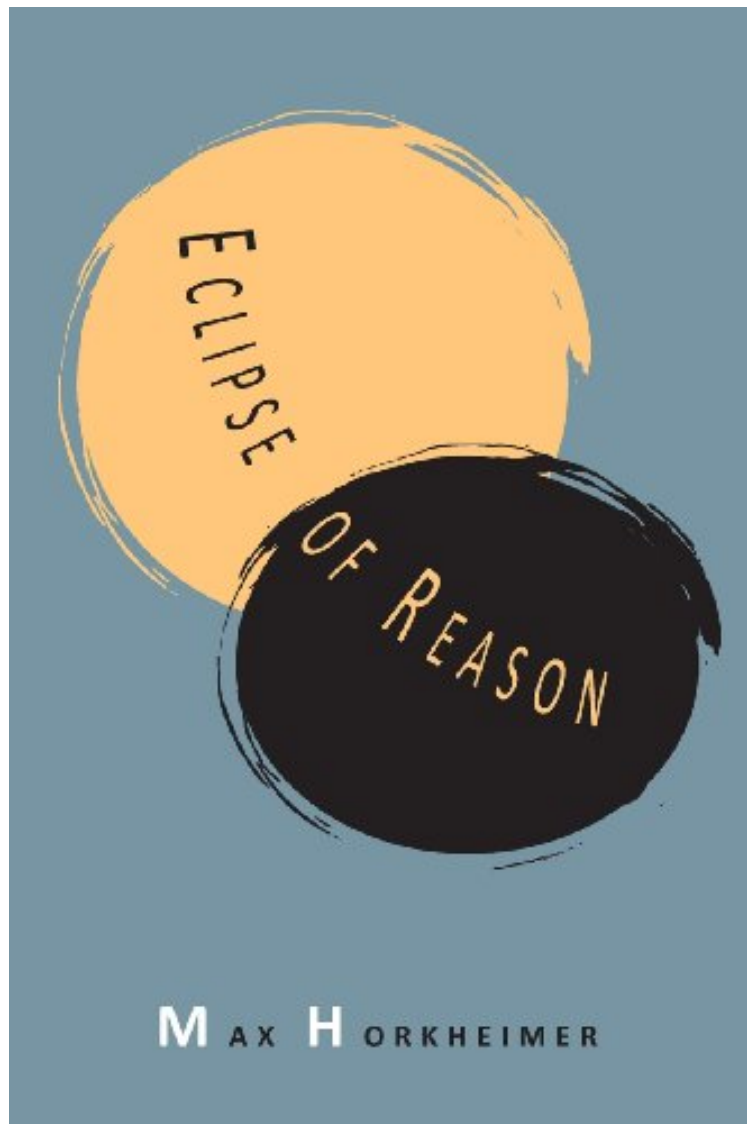


[Free] Eclipse of Reason

Eclipse of Reason

Max Horkheimer

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Max Horkheimer : Eclipse of Reason before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Eclipse of Reason:

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A critique of instrumental reason By Peter Capofreddi In Eclipse of Reason, Max Horkheimer, one of the most well known and influential theorists of the so-called Frankfurt School, calls our attention to a significant alteration in the concepts of reason and rationality in the twentieth century. While under an earlier conception of reason it was possible to assess the rationality of ends as well as means, it now seems

impossible to employ reason unless the goal is set beforehand. "The idea that an aim can be reasonable for its own sake--on the basis of virtues that insight reveals it to have in itself--without reference to some kind of subjective gain or advantage" is utterly alien to our new exclusively instrumental conception of rationality. Under the new form of reason it becomes impossible to discuss the reasonableness of a goal unless it is subservient to another goal. The ultimate aims of human activity are set not by reason but by arbitrary whim. "There is no reasonable aim as such, and to discuss the superiority of one aim over another in terms of reason becomes meaningless. From the subjective approach, such a discussion is possible only if both aims serve a third and higher one, that is, if they are means, not ends." (p. 4) If men are best judges of their own interests, then the interests of mankind as a whole can be decided by polls and markets. But how do we know men are best judges of their own interests? To answer this question we must rely on "some sort of reason underlying not only means but ends." We might try to argue that we know men are best judges of their own interests because the majority believes this, but since the principle of majority rule is based on the idea that men are best judges of their own interests, this seems to involve us in circular argument. Horkheimer points out that the principle of majority rule was, historically, based on metaphysical arguments about the dignity of each human individual. If reasoning about ends is discarded, democracy can be justified only by the fact that it exists. And by this standard tyranny can be justified just as readily. (pp. 26-27) The role of the "pathfinders of modern thought," Horkheimer reminds us, was not to devise theories that could be reconciled with sacred documents or generally accepted beliefs. It was to create new sacred documents, and persuade the world to change its beliefs. The great religious and philosophical leaders of the past did not praise humility and brotherly love because they were accepted, because they were realistic, or because they were norms enforced by conformity. They praised them based on an idea of reason, or *logos*, that transcended existing circumstances and called for better ones. (pp. 33-34) While we pay lip service to the idea that rhetoric might inspire improvement in individuals or societies, in practice "language has been reduced to just another tool in the gigantic apparatus of production." Any words that don't directly refer to measurable quantities are suspected of being "sales talk of some kind." Even children aren't immune from the cynical view that rhetoric always conceals advertisements or rationalizations. Thinking itself has been reduced to an industrial process. Reason is no longer an autonomous force, but merely an instrument to be used by the blind forces of nature or power. (pp. 21-22) An important difference must be noted between Horkheimer's view and later "postmodern" views it arguably inspired. The idea that acquiescence of reason to power is the norm in the statistical sense is very easily confused with the idea that it is the norm in the moral sense. The principle of majority rule, interpreted as a demand that thinking conform to the statistical norm, has become "a new god, not in the sense in which the heralds of the great revolutions conceived it, namely, as a power of resistance to existing injustice, but as a power of resistance to anything that does not conform." (p. 30) Horkheimer tells us about the transformation of reason into an instrument of power, but he never says we must abandon the attempt to resurrect a form of reason capable of judging ends as well as means. Unlike postmodernists who acquiesce in the loss of objective reasoning about ends, or even celebrate it, Horkheimer laments its demise. He recognizes that a new emasculated, neutralized, impotent reason unable to confront power is what rules society. But he doesn't concede that it must rule. The postmodernist version of critical theory, on the other hand, by celebrating the new emasculated, neutralized, impotent form of reason rather than resisting it, seems to have inherited the description of the battle from Horkheimer only to take the opposite side. *Eclipse of Reason* was published in English in 1947. In 1967 a German translation appeared under the title *Zur Kritik der Instrumentellen Vernunft* (Toward a Critique of Instrumental Reason). The form of reason Horkheimer praises he calls "objective." The form he criticizes he calls sometimes "formalized," sometimes "subjective," and sometimes "instrumental." As far as I can tell, Horkheimer doesn't object to formalization as such, but to the fact that it has been used to narrow the scope of reason's claims. He doesn't seem to object to the individual exercising reason independently, but to the fact that individuals almost always reason in terms of the incentives offered by existing power structures. Subjective reason, in the sense used in this book, treats the ends chosen by polls and markets as part of the natural environment. It treats the incentives put in place to enforce these ends as a natural fact, no more amenable to rational critique than the orbit of the planets. Subjective reason always optimizes the subject's personal interests in light of these incentives. It never criticizes them. "Subjective reason conforms to anything," no matter how irrational or inhumane. (p. 25) According to the terms of the "peace settlement" between religion and philosophy that is in force today, secular philosophy surrenders all questions about ends to religion, while religion surrenders all questions about means to secular philosophy. As a result of this settlement, religion has given up the claim that the forms of life it advocates are reasonable. And philosophy has given up the claim that reason is "an organ for perceiving the true nature of reality and determining the guiding principles of our lives." (p. 18) Pragmatism and positivism, two of the most influential forces in today's American philosophy departments, both fare badly under Horkheimer's criticism. Pragmatism assumes at the outset that truth in itself is not a value, but only an instrument that leads to "something that is alien or at least different from truth." This contrasts with the method of earlier philosophers, for whom practical life was a precondition for the pursuit of truth, not its aim. Horkheimer is uncertain if, after this reversal of values, pragmatism can even justly claim to be part of the philosophical tradition. "One might be tempted to deny any philosophical pedigree to a doctrine that holds not that our actions are successful because our ideas are true, but rather that our ideas are true because our

expectations are fulfilled and our actions successful." (p. 42) Among other difficulties, positivism is subject to doubts about its own consistency. "In refusing to verify their own principle--that no statement is meaningful unless verified-- [positivists] are guilty of *petitio principii*, begging the question." In fact positivism bases its principles not on any form of philosophical reasoning, but on an observation of how "successful" sciences like physics are conducted. Again we find instrumental reason uncritically supposing existing social structures are always rational. (p. 76) The instrumentalization of reason has also taken its toll on art. When we listen to a symphony today, we imagine we appreciate it on the basis of an "autonomous aesthetic instinct." But if we were to inquire into the origins of this so-called instinct, Horkheimer claims we would find a prehistory behind it. "Man's ... belief in the goodness or sacredness of a thing precedes his enjoyment of its beauty." Now that our beliefs in goodness and sacredness are no longer rationally defensible, we can no longer wholeheartedly believe in them. Our appreciation for art relies on "old forms of life smoldering under the surface of modern civilization." The warmth and delight we still find in art today are merely a result of these vestigial remnants of a now discarded form of reason, and, as a result, are now rapidly fading. (pp. 35-36) Personally, I came to be interested in *Eclipse of Reason* as a result of ethical questions about my work. The means we employ in engineering are exquisitely rational, based on the very undemocratic idea that the truths of mathematics and physics are to be decided on the basis of objective reasoning, irrespective of whether or not the majority assents to them. The ends of our work, however, are determined by the opinions of the majority as determined by polls and markets, irrespective of whether or not they are rational. Engineers in Central Europe in the 1940s rationally planned how hydrogen cyanide gas would be produced and stored in canisters. They believed they were fulfilling their duty, being rational about means while leaving the choice of ends to their rulers. Engineers today rationally plan how coal will be extracted from mines and converted to electricity and carbon dioxide. We too believe we are fulfilling our duty by obeying. But we might ask, does a mind capable of devising exquisitely complex means have a duty to ask whether the ends for which they will be used are humane and rational? Or is obedience to majority and marketplace sufficient? The answers depend fundamentally on the issues Horkheimer confronts in *Eclipse of Reason*. Horkheimer suggests that moral and intellectual progress is now blocked by a "debilitation of the will" caused by its "premature diversion into endless activities under the pressure of fear." (p. 186) In my own case, this rings very true. As a conscientious engineer I have always put aside my own will and looked to the marketplace as the sole guide to what activities are worthwhile. My intellectual energy has been dissipated in solving thousands of tiny problems, so none remained to confront the larger question of whether the ends of my work were rationally justified. The brutal way our society treats dissenters has always hung over my head, and, conveniently for my rulers, produced the fear they needed to get me to put reasoning about ends aside, and focus entirely on means to solve their problems. 47 of 49 people found the following review helpful. Seeking Reason Beyond Reason By Benjamin

Despite its compact size, Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* is a potent manifesto against the instrumentalization of Reason in the Enlightenment, which led to a culture in which the most barbaric of acts - the Holocaust, with all of its mediated manipulation under the Nazis - could take place. At points a whirlwind tour through some of the major trends in intellectual history since Plato, *The Eclipse of Reason* can be as dense as it is potent. It will reward only a close and careful reading. "Progress threatens to nullify the very goal it is supposed to realize - the idea of man" (v). This sentence, contained in the Preface, concisely states the main concern that animates the entire book. The Enlightenment comes in for heavy critique throughout these pages, for in separating reason from religion it "retained God, but not grace" (11) and effectively killed metaphysics. Having cut itself off from any notion of a grounding worldview, it finds its ultimate expression in the development of the American worldview, as best expressed in the only philosophical movement to have ever grown up out of America's own soil: Pragmatism, which Horkheimer writes "reflects a society that has no time to remember and meditate" (30). The lack of time and transcendence - the lack of any fundamental notion of Truth, which is fundamental to American liberalism - helps undermine any and all notions of beauty as a revealing of Truth. The reduction of everything to mere practicality robs humanity of something fundamental to it, which is contained in the work of art: seeing something beyond ourselves, outside of ourselves. Practicality reduces everything to a mere tool: and this is the essence of totalitarian violence. Digging deeper, Horkheimer reaches back to the very origin of modern thought on the individual: Socrates. This individualism grows with the Reformation, and then the Enlightenment; against this rise in individualism is itself the huge shifts in Christianity that began in earnest with the Reformation: a Christianity that, like Hamlet, has lost its Christian faith but not its Christian soul (93). The collapse of the medieval worldview and the loss of the Church as the central authority meant that the Christian conception of self - and individual made in the image of God, thus invested with infinite worth and given the opportunity of moral choice - would continue without the Christian concept of authority. This individual would, however, even lose its cosmic worth as technology progressed; the individual would eventually become nothing more than an economic unit. In the end, all of this leads to the death of philosophy, meaning that "irrationality still molds the fate of men" (106). Thus, Horkheimer's conclusion is worth quoting in full: "If by enlightenment and intellectual progress we mean the freeing of man from superstitious belief in evil forces, in demons and fairies, in blind fate - in short, emancipation of fear - then denunciation of what is currently called reason is the greatest service reason can render" (126). 6 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Restoring Objective Reason By not a natural American

pragmatism is a philosophical movement that I have long admired. In particular, John Dewey's book *The Public and Its Problems* and George Herbert Mead's lectures reported in *Mind, Self, and Society* are both conceptually original and analytically brilliant. They have relatively painlessly given me the intellectual wherewithal to make sense of aspects of our shared world that previously eluded me. Neither book is perfect, but both merit reading and re-reading. However, until I read Max Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, I was completely oblivious to a serious limitation shared by Dewey, Mead, and the rest of the pragmatists, a limitation that is becoming increasingly pervasive and deep-rooted among the rest of us, perhaps most conspicuously in American society. Specifically, the philosophical notion of reason has more and more been reduced to what Horkheimer terms subjective reason, while objective reason has become the victim of exacerbated neglect. This assertion is not difficult to understand when Horkheimer explains that subjective reason refers to the predictive relationship between means and ends, and has little or no interest in the intrinsic character of either, while objective reason focuses on the things themselves, inquiring first and foremost as to their value. Subjective reason, it is easy to see, is the instrument of those with a practical bent, people, groups, nations, and classes who are interested in production of one thing from another. Thus, automobiles are produced from hundreds of parts manufactured in a broad range of factories that may be located in places that virtually span the globe. The parts themselves, moreover, are manufactured from raw materials that may be similarly diverse in their origins. The essential means-ends relationship pervades this overall process, and a similar schematic account could be applied to a disparate aggregate of other things that we routinely consume or that are used ostensibly on our behalf, such as military hardware. The means-end relationship that characterizes subjective reason is not something that Horkheimer would cast aside as inevitably yielding a world that is at odds with the best interests of human beings, though in some instances this may be true. But if we want to eat, be clothed, housed, have access to adequate medical care, and manifold other necessities, subjective reason, as manifest in the means-end relationship, is essential. Horkheimer's objection to the pervasiveness of subjective reason is that it and its ethos of positivism, along with substantively unevaluated productivity, have driven objective reason and its purpose out of philosophical discourse. In effect, and exaggerating just a bit, this means that production proceeds at an ever-increasing pace with regard to ever-more varied outcomes, but their value is taken for granted. Anyone who has taken a course in contemporary economics and has been told that utilities -- say a free clinic for the poor versus a ski slope for the affluent -- cannot be compared, will immediately understand Horkheimer's concern and why he presents it so emphatically. When we speak of objective reason, we are, indeed, raising the possibility of comparing utilities, because we are addressing the issue of values. By shifting the emphasis from the relationship between unexamined means and ends, we are focusing on the ends themselves. This essential alteration of our perspective enables us to transcend evaluation of what we are producing in monetary and similarly vulgar terms and examine the things themselves with regard to less restrictive criteria. In addition, when we enter the philosophical purview of objective reason, ideas that true-blue and exclusive proponents of subjective reason find intractable and which they therefore dismiss as meaningless, can be given the attention they are due. The notion of causality, for example, is used commonsensically and its meaning seems not to be problematic. However, there is a massive philosophical and methodological literature that has accumulated since Hume's critique of causality as nothing more than constant conjunction. Cause as such, in this view, is just a shorthand way of expressing a recurring temporal sequence. Cause does not exist. While this definitional issue poses no problems for subjective reason which can continue to rely on recurring temporal succession between means and end, for objective reason the concept cause merits close and contemplative examination, an aspect of our world, manifest in our language, that deserves to be understood. In effect, objective reason restores metaphysics as a legitimate area of endeavor, and ideas that have too readily been dismissed as meaningless are again worthy of examination. Beyond that, exclusive reliance on subjective reason masks the nature of our world behind a technocratic, positivistic, instrumental facade. When we step back and examine the world objectively, however, we begin to see that technocracy and positivism, seemingly neutral and devoid of corruption, are tools in the service of particularistic class interests. Marx himself celebrated the scientific and technological achievements of capitalism as historically unprecedented and overwhelmingly powerful, but he also understood that they served particular interests, the interests of capital, rather than universal interests. As such, they were instruments of domination and exploitation that thwarted individual development for all but a few. Objective reason applied to a social system could reveal its pernicious character. I still revere the work of American pragmatists, especially Dewey and Mead, but Horkheimer has alerted me to serious deficiencies in their program. Horkheimer's passing references to the misguided nature of some of the critical efforts of the institutional economist Thorstein Veblen have similarly broadened my perspective. Undisciplined debunking can, indeed, be destructive when we are guided exclusively by subjective reason and have not acknowledged the role of objective reason. Veblen's contributions remain wonderfully illuminating, but I am now able to sort through them more capably. *Eclipse of Reason* is not an easy read, but given time and effort it is accessible. Published in 1947 based on lectures delivered in 1944, with the exception of a few issues such as the role of labor unions, it is remarkably timely. There is very little about the process of the globalization of world capital that would surprise Horkheimer, and there is a great deal that he foresaw. It would be wonderfully convenient if how one does objective reasoning could be sketched as simply and neatly as how one does subjective reasoning. The fact that this is not the case may be yet another reason why

subjective reason has become the preeminent form, while objective reason is dismissed as unduly metaphysical.

2013 Reprint of 1947 Edition. Exact facsimile of the original edition, not reproduced with Optical Recognition Software. "Eclipse of Reason" discusses how the Nazis were able to project their agenda as "reasonable". It is broken into five sections: 1] Means and Ends, 2] Conflicting Panaceas, 3]The Revolt of Nature, 4] The Rise and Decline of the Individual and 5] On the Concept of Philosophy. It also treats the concept of reason within the history of western philosophy.

About the AuthorMax Horkheimer, founder and long-time director of the famous Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, was professor emeritus of philosophy and sociology at the University of Frankfurt until his death in 1973. He is one of the founders of the Frankfurt School.