Reason and Unreason in Politics

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Sixty years ago, when Michael Oakeshott's famous essay on 'Rationalism in Politics' first appeared in book form, the 'isms' were not yet 'wasms'. In that—now quaintly distant world—the horrors of National Socialism had only recently been removed from the scene; the disasters of Soviet and Maoist Marxism were still being visited on hundreds of millions of people living behind the iron curtain; British industry was the scene of industrial warfare between Socialism and Capitalism. In short, politics and geopolitics were under the sway of battling theories, each of which purported to deliver 'right answers' to political problems.

It was against these 'rationalist' theories and theorists that Oakeshott took aim. Like Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin, though in a different idiom and deploying different arguments, Oakeshott sought to demolish the scientific pretensions of the 'isms' by exposing the theoretical inadequacy of all pseudo-scientific political theorising from Platonism to Marxism. Alongside this creative destruction, his positive intent was to restore the intellectual respectability of practical reasoning, recognised by Aristotle as the proper mode of moral and political life but despised by the pseudo-scientific theorists of right and left. He accordingly characterised truly rational political discourse as an unending non-theoretical conversation about the practical wisdom of political action, a continuing effort to keep the ship of state afloat on a stormy sea.

Much has changed since the early 1960s—not least, the virtual disappearance of the nineteenth and twentieth century rationalist 'isms' from politics and geopolitics. The propagation of high theory purporting to deliver political truth has become, for the time being at least, a niche activity restricted to a few eccentrics. The far right has abandoned all claim to a theoretical base. Mainstream Marxism, though nominally preserved in China, has in fact become so thoroughly infected by state capitalism as to be radically anti-Marxist. European socialism has become so impregnated by market economics as to be radically anti-socialist. And what used to be thought of as 'free market' governing parties throughout the so-called capitalist world (even if subject to liberal democratic constraints unknown to the Chinese) are now sponsoring state intervention of a kind that is often difficult to distinguish from the Chinese economic model.

In short, we no longer stand in imminent danger of barbarism engendered by theory. Instead, we face a new danger—the danger of barbarism engendered by barbarity, bizarrely supported by the wilder excesses of 'critical thought'. The enemy of rationality in today's politics is not rationalism but unreason, not high theory but low populism, not the pretensions of pseudo-science but a blithe disregard

for, or disbelief in, every form of science and every form of fact. Today's political irrationality invokes categories which did not enter Oakeshott's vocabulary: 'alternative facts', 'his (or her) truth', 'post-truth'. We are threatened, forty years on, with the triumph not of misguided ideologies but of Orwell's fantasies for 1984—'newspeak' and 'double think'. The possibility that a politician might be taken seriously when announcing that 'reality is perception' or that 'disease is health' or that 'war is peace' no longer seems remote.

The political 'isms' against which Oakeshott and Popper and Berlin so nobly struggled in the post-war years came at a high cost to humanity. But there is no guarantee that the cost to humanity of today's unreason in politics will be any lower. In particular, unreason is a deadly enemy of liberal democracy, attacking it in three ways.

The first attack consists in the destruction of the form of conversation required to sustain a liberal democracy. Where contestants in the political debate abandon adherence to the requirement for reasoned argument and verified assertion, the debate descends into a mere shouting match.

The second attack consists in the destruction of the ability of liberal democracy to deliver good government. Where the debate becomes nothing better than a shouting match, the winner is he or she who shouts loudest, rather than he or she who will govern best.

The third attack consists in the destruction of faith in the institutions of a liberal democracy. Seeing the debate descend into a shouting match and the participants becoming nothing better than rival noise-makers, sensible citizens begin to question the value of liberal democracy and become increasingly attracted to rule by technocrats or high-minded oligarchs.

For those of us who are attached to liberal democracy as a form of social organisation, these effects of unreason in politics are concerning. We therefore need to defend reason in politics. We need to re-establish the value of intellectual honesty, truth and fact as the hallmarks of proper political conversation. But these propositions are not self-evident. Once challenged, they require to be defended by re-establishing that there are facts, that there is truth, and that politics should not be divorced from them.

Wittgenstein (whose philosophising shares much more with Oakeshott's than is commonly supposed) begins his *Tractatus* with the immortal line, "the world is all that is the case", and then expands this into the statement that "the world is the totality of facts, not of things". Taken together, these statements constitute an assertion of common sense, and a cry of desperation against both scepticism and reductionism. One does not need to be a Wittgensteinian of any variety, still less a follower of the early Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, to heed that cry. There is much that is real besides physical things. Words are real. Numbers are real. Musical notes are real. Love and friendship, resentment and disgust, marriage and law are all real. None of these are physical things. But they are facts that populate the world. They cannot be wished or dreamed away by sceptics, or reduced away by physical reductionism or crude verificationism.

Anyone seeking to deny the reality of words is compelled to issue the denial in words, and hence to convict himself of incoherence. A word is a reality, not an illusion; and it is a reality (a fact) that is not reducible to a physical thing.

Likewise, causes and reasons are real. They, too, cannot be wished or dreamed away by sceptics, or reduced away by physical reductionism or crude verificationism. And they operate at many interlocking levels of reality.

Scientists are very used to such levels of causal reality. Medics identify causes of change at the level of human life; biologists and micro-biologists identify causes of change at the level of cells and molecules; chemists and physicists identify causes of change at the level of atomic and sub-atomic particles. Causation at one of these levels of reality is not necessarily reducible to causation at some more microscopic level. Physicists do not expect to be able to identify whether someone losing their job has caused them to be anxious about the future—because, unlike psychiatrists, physicists do not deal with items such as jobs and anxiety. As Oakeshott would have put it, psychiatry and physics are two, equally valid but distinct 'modes of experience' which yield distinct causal accounts because they deal with distinct aspects of the world.

This is not, of course, to suggest that anxiety about the future or losing a job are supernatural things. It is, rather, to say that—though they will have physical correlates a-plenty—they are not 'things' at all. But

they are nevertheless facts in the world, realities as real as any thing. They may be related by causality that is cognitive (dependent upon meaning) rather than physical, but which is nonetheless real for that. The loss of a job is real. Anxiety about the future is real. One may perhaps cause the other. But the chain of causation cannot be grasped without understanding the significance, the meaning, of losing a job: to understand why the neurological events associated with the anxiety are occurring, you need to understand the cognitive significance of the event that has occurred. Hence, what is explicable and causative at one level of reality may be random and inexplicable at another level of reality.

So we live in a world of facts, of realities; but also in a world composed of many levels and kinds of reality, which cannot necessarily be reduced to one another. And, just as there are many different valid ways of connecting real things, so there are many different ways in which we use language to describe those things—each of which will have its own particular test of validity.

If we want to understand the relationship between politics, or political language, and reality, we need to understand what is the appropriate test of validity for political language.

In the case of some forms of abstraction, enquiries into truthfulness constitute merely an elaborate kind of joke. A tune is an abstraction. But enquiring into its truthfulness would be as much a category error as asking whether green ideas sleep furiously. We may ask whether the tune is beautiful, but we cannot ask seriously whether it is true or untrue, unless there are exceptional circumstances (e.g. if it is, or is suspected of being, a coded message).

A map, by contrast, is a form of abstraction about whose accuracy or truthfulness we may well enquire—because the point of a map is to guide action, and it will guide action correctly only if it is accurate enough to enable the user to achieve the purposes for which the map is designed. Of course, the test of the truth of a map is not whether all users who act on it achieve what they would (under all of the circumstances) achieve if it were accurate—but rather whether all users *who know how to use the map* achieve such results.

We can take this as a paradigm for those forms of factual abstraction which, like maps, have the purpose of guiding action. The test of the truth of an abstraction intended to guide action is whether actors, who know how to use the abstraction and whose acts are guided by it, achieve what, under all the circumstances, they would achieve if it were true. (This is of course epistemologically complicated, because it is difficult to know all of the relevant circumstances, there is always a chance that the outcome has occurred for some reason other than the action prompted by the belief, etc, etc. But the foundational point remains after all of the complexities are acknowledged. Factual abstractions intended to guide action are true if they can be used to navigate the world in the way that the factual abstraction would lead a competent user to expect.)

Logic, mathematics and philosophical reasoning may enable abstractions to be tested in a different way—for internal coherence, or for consistency with other abstractions known or believed to be true. The propositions of logic, mathematics and fundamental philosophy are abstractions at the highest possible level. They are tools or rules for constructing, tidying up, or characterising other high-level abstractions—or for understanding how they themselves or those other abstractions function (the very activity in which we are currently engaged). They are in this sense procedural.

Taken together, such higher level abstractions form a complex web of procedures and procedural rules and observations about procedures and procedural rules. Within this web, procedures, procedural rules and observations may themselves be tested and modified by one another. In all of these transactions, coherence and consistency are the tests of validity.

But the ultimate test of the validity of the whole procedural (ie logical, mathematical and philosophical) web is whether the everyday factual abstractions constructed, modified or validated using the procedures within the web lead to actions that work in the world. Hence, the relationship between mathematics, physics, engineering, bridge-building, and bridges that last or fall down: it would not be wise to travel across a bridge constructed by an engineer who believes that 'alternative mathematics' will do just as well as the real thing.

However, when we turn from factual abstractions to propositions about moral or aesthetic value, the situation is fundamentally different.

Meta-ethical theories and analytic ethical theories are forms of philosophy. They may lead to the revision of moralities, but they do not in themselves constitute moralities, and do not in themselves constitute recommendations for action. Accordingly, as with the rest of philosophy, the test of their validity is 'only' internal coherence or consistency.

But, by contrast, normative moral theories and specific moral injunctions pass beyond the analytical. Instead of being offered purely as dispassionate analyses, they make recommendations for action—as with a map, but with a crucial difference. Unlike the map, which is offered as a hypothetical guide to action ('if you want to get to B, starting from A, go this way'), normative moral theories and specific moral injunctions recommend courses of action which are intended to be categorical rather than hypothetical ('go this way because it is the right thing to do'). Hence, even when they present the appearance of theory rather than practice, their underlying structure is that of categorical imperatives governing or purporting to govern action.

Manifestly, moral assertions—even when they are in this sense guides to action—cannot be validated in the same way as a map, on the basis of whether they work in the world. One cannot sensibly ask: "if I act in accordance with this morality will I achieve what I would achieve if the morality were true?", because one cannot identify anything that one would achieve if one were to follow the morality other than having followed the morality. If I act in accordance with the belief-system that constitutes a particular morality—ie in accordance with the commands of that belief-system that are categorical, not hypothetical or assertoric—there is nothing in the world against which to check the accuracy of my belief. The hypotheses presented by a map ('if you want to go from A to B, follow this route') can be checked and validated or invalidated; categorical imperatives can only be obeyed or disobeyed.

If my morality commands me to walk into the flames of a martyr's death, I can sensibly (albeit rather painfully) ask (as I burn) whether my abstract factual belief that the flames would burn me if I walked into them has been borne out by acting upon it; but nothing about the fact that the flames are burning me will tell me whether I was right to act on the command. (This is the familiar fact/value distinction—or the familiar aversion to the naturalistic fallacy—re-presented in a slightly different idiom.)

But maybe moralities can be subjected to a different form of the working-in-the-world test?

It seems clear that a morality can be self-defeating in the world. For example, a morality that lacks concepts of trust and honesty will ultimately prevent its exponents from cooperating successfully.

A morality may also be self-contradictory (involving two or more judgements that cannot rationally be made together). It may, in other words, contain or depend upon logical procedural deficiencies.

Or a morality may in some way depend on factual propositions that are testably false—ie that, if acted upon by an actor who understood them, would not reliably lead to the results that would occur if they were true—for example, a morality based on false claims about differences between people of different ethnicities or genders.

In cases like these, appeals to change a moral practice may be made, and may succeed. Such appeals are either factual or procedural in character. They may take the form either of pointing to an incoherence, or of pointing to a factually mistaken belief—either 'change the practice because it doesn't cohere with moral beliefs that you hold more dear', or 'change the practice because it is having an effect of which you hadn't been factually aware'.

Once subject to appeals of this kind, a particular moral belief system may be unable to sustain itself in the face of alternates. This may happen suddenly or only over a long time. There may be moralities that subsist alongside one another for long periods during which they are not in any evident way plagued by any procedural defects or false factual presumptions, and may yet eventually be subject to forms of appeal that lead their adherents to modify or abandon them, due to the belated recognition of procedural defects or to the belated discovery of factual errors.

Unlike moralities, political settlements may alter over time without any of these defects or errors having become apparent—simply because those who have previously accepted them decide that they are no longer tolerable. Such revised views of what constitute tolerable forms of social life are, indeed, the normal reasons for changes in political belief systems. The principal test we apply to the validity of a political appeal is whether the form of life thought likely to arise from heeding the appeal is judged likely to be more satisfactory in some sufficiently important respect to merit change.

It follows that—within any political community at any one time— an appeal for change (unless compelled by the discovery of a logical defect or a false factual presumption) needs to proceed by persuading those whose view we hope to change, that the change in question will deliver a form of life which will be judged more satisfactory by them or by the community.

The anchor, here, is the preconceptions of those we hope to change: we have to persuade them that a particular political change will lead to a form of life that they already conceive to be superior to their current form of life in some respect.

If acting upon such recommendations for change in political practice does indeed lead to a form of life considered *ex post* to be more satisfactory, then the recommendation for political change is in that specific sense validated.

But this validation does not establish the recommendation as a political fact. It is merely a contingent approval. It lasts only for as long as the forms of life arising from actions undertaken in conformity with the recommendations contained in the appeal continue to be regarded as satisfactory by the relevant political community.

Of course such political appeals or recommendations are complex items. They frequently amalgamate factual propositions, prudential recommendations and moral recommendations. Their origins—the states of mind from which they spring—are also complex. These may include factual beliefs, prudential desires, moral beliefs, emotional responses, psychological needs, creative impulses . . .

Disentangling such elements and motivations from one another, in order to discern the 'true nature' and 'true origin' of a particular political appeal is accordingly a complex act of discovery. The complexity of the amalgamations within and behind a political appeal, and the consequent complexity of the act of disentanglement, typically makes it impossible to understand the nature of the appeal without also understanding a considerable amount about the political actor making it and about the context within which it is being made.

A political appeal, as opposed to an administrative command, is likely to have (or at least to be presented as having) the form of a practical syllogism—"do X, because if you do X it will lead to Y, and *you* desire Y". But such an appeal made by a particular political actor in a particular setting may, beneath the surface, have the form of an importantly different practical syllogism: "do X, because if you do X it will lead to Y, and I desire Y".

Only once the practical syllogisms contained within a political appeal have been disentangled from the surrounding 'mood music', can their validity in principle be tested.

In political appeals which contain practical syllogisms dependent only upon factual observations rather than social recommendations, the tests of validity are tests of truth—tests of whether the factual observation works in the world. (This may, of course, in a given case be very difficult to establish—due to the complexity of the world, the need for time to tell whether hypotheticals come true in the world, the difficulty of obtaining evidence, and so forth.)

In political appeals which contain practical syllogisms dependent upon both factual propositions and social recommendations, both types of validation—tests of factual truth, and observations about the satisfactory or unsatisfactory nature of likely *ex post* effects on forms of communal political life—are required. The task of achieving such complex validation (even assuming that the practical syllogisms inherent in the political appeal have been successfully disentangled) may be arduous and lengthy.

In practice, there is rarely time to conduct such validation before a decision is made about whether to accept or reject a given political appeal. Hence, this idealised, rational approach to disentanglement and

validation is seldom applied. It is not how politics in any system, regime, time or place tends to work in practice.

The actual mechanics of political appeals at most times and in most places depend instead upon brand, identity, trust, hope, fear and rhetoric. The political message becomes wholly entwined in the messenger. The purpose of political communication is not so much to persuade the listener of the validity of a set of propositions as to establish a certain relationship between the listener and the communicator: *I am the sort of person you are, or at least the sort of person with whom you can identify yourself….therefore, you can trust me….therefore, you do not need to enquire too far into the validity of my arguments or the evidence for my assertions…..the fact that they are my arguments and my assertions is enough to make them 'your truth'.*

Great political movements, effective political alliances, enduring political affiliations are formed on the basis of such emotionally powerful, but intellectually fragile appeals. The leaders of such movements become the embodiments of brands trusted by followers. The followers follow the leaders not because of any analytical subscription, but because the leaders have the emotional intelligence to establish the brand, to communicate the identity, to generate the trust, and hence to play on the fears or encourage the hopes of the followers.

It is out of this, repeated and inevitable dynamic that unreason in politics is born. In the politics of unreason, the medium (the appeal of brand, the appeal to trust) becomes the message itself, rather than merely the means by which the message acquires political traction. The political process ceases to be based on arduous efforts by the leaders to disentangle the practical syllogisms of responsible government. The leaders themselves cease to be guided by coherent, reasoned argument and by evidenced assertions. The debate, even at the highest and most refined levels, ceases to subject factual assertions to tests of truth, and ceases to consider seriously whether given political recommendations are likely to lead to a form of life that will be considered *ex post* to be more satisfactory. In place of such careful analysis, come sectarian requirements for loyalty to the brand, unquestioning implementation of the dictates of the leadership—the deadly consequences of dangerous populism—to the point where the mechanism of political appeal has poisoned the body politic.

What is the protection against such unreason in politics? Is there a bulwark that can be established? Is there a guarantee that can be constructed?

Sadly, the answer is that there can be no such external protection or bulwark or guarantee. The threat of the medium becoming the message—the threat that the leaders themselves will abandon the careful analysis required to disentangle the complex practical syllogisms of responsible government—is ever present. No constitutional system, no legal system, no political system can achieve immunity to these dangers, because leaders unconstrained by the need for valid argument and verified assertion will tend also to be unconstrained by such systems of protection. In the terms so notably coined by Michael Oakeshott, the observance by leaders of adverbial constraints is conditional upon those leaders at least intuitively subscribing to the practical syllogisms which justify those adverbial constraints. From the moment when the leaders abandon concern with the validity of the practical syllogisms they are purveying, they will tend to abandon also the concern that they might otherwise have for the constitutional apparatus that establishes adverbial constraints upon their actions. Indeed, they set out on a path which can all too easily lead to regarding that constitutional apparatus itself as an intolerable constraint on their freedom of action. In the populist world of 'alternative facts', the adverbial constraints and the means by which they are normally enforced—the judges, the legislature, the law itself—come to be seen, at least potentially, as 'enemies of the people'.

If there is no set of institutions that can be relied upon to protect us from unreason in politics, who or what can provide us with reason in politics?

In the twentieth century, Oakeshott did his best to save us from the rationalist 'isms'—Nazism, Fascism, Communism, Socialism. Alongside Popper and Berlin, he did an excellent job of intellectually demolishing those intellectual mistakes. But no amount of intellectual TNT will demolish irrational populism. It doesn't contain anything intellectual to be demolished. It is just a set of wayward dispositions exhibited by a set of wayward politicians.

So Oakeshott cannot save us from the ailments of our time. The only people who can save us from the unreason that now afflicts our politics is our politicians. Reason will govern politics if but only if the leaders who lead are themselves governed by reason.

To be effective, to gain traction, these leaders need of course to understand the medium; they need to have the emotional intelligence to make political appeals that work rhetorically by appealing to brand, trust and identity. But they need also, as a matter of character, to have the intellectual honesty to ensure that the messages they convey are based upon serious understanding of the practical syllogisms of responsible government—and hence on reasoned argument and verified factual assertions. If political debate, though inevitably carried into the wider public arena through the medium of brand, trust and identity, is conducted at the highest levels with such intellectual honesty on all sides, then reason in politics will prevail. Contingent resolutions will give way gracefully to other contingent resolutions as the *ex post* validity or invalidity of given practical syllogisms comes to light. But if political debate lacks such intellectual honesty, if the leaders of the debate themselves abandon adherence to reasoned argument and verified factual assertion, unreason in politics will prevail; neither any thinker nor any system will save us from it.

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