AGAINST RATIONALISM

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Rationality and the issues associated with it have always occupied a central place within the Western philosophical tradition. Moreover, as the humanities and social sciences have found themselves under assault from post-modernists and deconstructionists, the role of rationality has also become a pressing problem well beyond the borders of philosophy. In this paper I am going to take issue with one of the most familiar ways in which rationality has been conceived within the Western tradition of thought. *Rationalism*, as I shall call it, embodies a particular conception of the nature of human action, choice and well-being. The purpose of the paper is to call that conception into question and to suggest the possibility of alternatives. But I should make clear at the outset one thing that my purpose is *not*. It is not my intention to mount an attack on the notion of rationality itself, either the general notion or the idea of rationality in ethics. On the contrary. My hope is that these notions can be defended better once we rid ourselves of certain prejudicial conceptions regarding human nature. To put it briefly, I should like to free rationality from rationalism.

The Rationalist Ideal

What is rationalism? Rationalism, taken most generally, subscribes to an ideal of human self-development which consists in maximising human beings' discretionary power of choice and using it to select between those desires which are, and those which are not (or whose fulfilment is not) truly desirable. For the self to be fulfilled, mature and happy, the rational aspect of the self must be in control of its sensuous nature and desires. Harry Frankfurt gives a particularly succinct statement of the rationalist ideal in his very well-known paper "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person": "A person's will is free only if he is free to have the will he wants. This means that, with regard to any of his first-order desires, he is free either to make that desire his will or to make some other first-order desire his will instead."[1] Rationalism is, of course, by no means merely a modern view. On the contrary, the idea that we should be emancipated, so far as possible, from slavery to our immediate desires is a commonplace of Western philosophical thought that goes back at least to the Greeks.

For the Greeks of the classical age, moral action was closely connected to the possibility of rational knowledge; yet the moral order was seen to stand permanently under threat from unbridled desire. Although Plato believes, famously, that the practice of rational reflection has its effects on the feelings and motivations of those who engage in it – as we discover the good by reason, so we come to love it – he also believes that the unlimited effectiveness of

[1] H. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person", in G.

discursive reason is not guaranteed and that it is not merely reason that must hold the passions in check. So even in the ideal state, the Republic, a way must be found for desire to be kept in its place. Plato puts a vivid example of the way in which the appetite contradicts reason into Socrates's mouth:

> ...Leontion, son of Aglaion,...was on his way up from the Peiraeus, outside the north wall, when he noticed some corpses lying on the ground with the executioner standing by them. He wanted to go and look at them, and yet at the same time he held himself back in disgust. For a time he struggled with himself and averted his eyes, but in the end his desire got the better of him and he ran up to the corpses, opening his eyes wide and saying to them, "There you are, curse you – a lovely sight! Have a real good look!"[2]

Plato believes that his ideal citizens must have *thumos*: a third element whose presence is responsible for giving reason power to surmount appetite and desire. This capacity is held to be innate in human beings but can also be trained. In that case the *thumos* can enforce the claims of reason against the power of appetite:

> So the reason ought to rule, having the ability and foresight to act for the whole, and the *thumos* ought to obey and support it. And this concord between them is effected, as we said, by a combination of intellectual and physical training, which tunes up the reason by

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Watson (ed.), *Free Will* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1982), pp. 81-95, p. 94.

intellectual training and tones down the crudeness of natural high spirits by harmony and rhythm.[3]

So far, I have given a preliminary characterization of rationalism in terms of its *ideal* of human development. I want now to pursue matters by turning attention to the different means by which, it is thought, that ideal may be achieved.

Discursive Rationalism

(1) One view, which we might call *discursive rationalism,* identifies reason itself as the effective means by which the self emancipates itself from its slavery to a particular set of empirical desires. Discursive rationalism is, in a certain sense, rationalism in its purest form. It asserts the distinctive capacity of human beings to be motivated by the knowledge gained through reflection. The tradition of discursive rationalism starts, I think, obviously enough, with Plato and continues through the varieties of Greek thought to the extent that the latter embodies the view that philosophical reflection is an essential means for the practical achievement of the good life. The vein of discursive rationalism comes to the surface as a theme in the philosophy of German Idealism, culminating in Hegel's vision of the unity of theoretical and practical rationality in Absolute Knowledge and again in Jürgen Habermas's hugely

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[2]. *The Republic*, Book IV, 439-40.
[3] *The Republic*, Book IV, 441-42.

ambitious attempt to reconstruct the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School as an exercise in hermeneutic self-reflection.

A commitment to this position is the central conclusion to emerge from *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas's major work of the nineteen-sixties.[4] Habermas there argues against (what he takes to be) the reductive and purely instrumental conception of interests at work within the Marxist tradition. He advocates instead a fusion of the Marxist idea of the interested nature of action with the Idealists' conception of rational self-reflection. Thus the concluding third of the book carries the title: *Critique as the Unity of Knowledge and Interest.* As Habermas himself puts it:

> ... the concept of the interest of reason, introduced by Idealism, needs to be reinterpreted materialistically: the emancipatory interest itself is dependent on the interests in possible subjective action-orientation and in possible technical control... Interest is attached to actions that both establish the conditions of possible knowledge and depend on cognitive processes, although in different configurations according to the form of action... The act of self-reflection that "changes a life" is a movement of emancipation. Here the interest of reason cannot corrupt reason's cognitive power, because, as Fichte indefatigably explains, knowing and acting are fused in a *single* act.[5]

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[4] Habermas, J., *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) (London: Heinemann, 1978)

[5] *Knowledge and Human Interests*, pp. 211-12.

Practical Rationalism

(2) But not all rationalism is discursive rationalism. Indeed, not even Plato is committed to discursive rationalism alone. As the passage quoted above makes clear, reason on its own in Plato's view is not enough to enable us to overcome our desires if the latter's force is not otherwise held in check. Thus another form of rationalism seeks to achieve self-mastery not directly, by rational discourse addressed to one's own self, but indirectly, by rational action aimed at changing one's desires. If Plato is the great initiator of discursive rationalism, Aristotle, surely, is the founding father of practical rationalism: the advocate of training and habituation in the service of discretionary self-control. The supposition here is that we can diminish the power of unwanted desires by acting repeatedly in such a way that they are overridden.

Pessimism

(3) So far, I have divided rationalism between those who believe that the end of rational self-mastery is achieved by discursive means from those who believe that it is to be achieved by means of educative practice – always remembering that the two themes may be married, more or less happily, within individual thinkers. (We have seen as much in Plato, and the same is true of Aristotle.) But there is one further approach to the rationalist ideal of human self-development that has played an extremely significant role in the history of

Western thought. This position, which I shall call *pessimism*, characteristically endorses the rationalists' end of self-mastery but denies that the rational means available to human beings – either discursive or practical – are sufficient to achieve that end. Pessimism is represented most strongly within the Christian religious tradition and its seminal figure is, without question, Saint Augustine.

Augustine accepted a great deal of Platonism (he concedes in the *City of God* that the Platonists "approached the truth more nearly than other philosophers"[6]) but in his account of knowledge and the will he consciously inverts the Platonic metaphor of the self-development of the individual by the light of reason. As he describes it in the *Confessions*: "... I did not know before becoming a Christian that the soul needs to be enlightened by light from outside itself, so that it can participate in truth, because it is not itself the nature of truth"[7] Human beings, according to Augustine, cannot reach truth unaided. Nor are they able to control their passions, even to prevent themselves from acting in ways that they do not want to. In our fallen state, our bodies are motivated not by reason and the will, but by *lust*. So, fallen human beings are doubly removed from true goodness. First, their desires are not those that a truly good being would have; but, secondly, there is a gulf between desire and the capacity for action, and, in consequence, human beings are not even able to live their lives so as to realise those evil desires that they actually have:

[6] St Augustine, *City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 580

> It was because man forsook God by pleasing himself that he was handed over to himself, and because he did not obey God he could not obey himself. Hence came the more obvious misery where man does not live as he wishes to live. If he lived as he wished, he would consider himself happy; yet even so he would not be really happy if he lived in degradation.[8]

St Augustine's writings contain some of the most vivid (and touching) of all images of human beings' misery caused by their failure to match their actions to their desires. At one point in the *Confessions* he relates the story of his friend, Alypius, in a way that seems to represent (although we have no reason to believe that the story was not true) a rhetorical echo of Plato's account of Leontion:

> [Alypius] arrived in Rome before I did to study law. There he had been seized by an incredible obsession for gladiatorial spectacles and to an unbelievable degree. He held such spectacles in aversion and detestation; but some of his friends and fellow-pupils on their way back from a dinner happened to meet him in the street and, despite his energetic refusal and resistance, used friendly violence to take him into the amphitheatre during the days of the cruel and murderous games. He said: "If you drag my body to that place and sit me down there, do not imagine that you can turn my mind and my eyes to those spectacles. I

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[7] St Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1991), p. 68

shall be as one not there, and so I shall overcome both you and the games." They heard him, but none the less took him with them, wanting perhaps to discover whether he could actually carry it off. When they arrived and had found seats where they could, the entire place seethed with monstrous delight in the cruelty. He kept his eyes shut and forbade his mind to think about such fearful evils. Would that he had blocked his ears as well! A man fell in combat. A great roar from the entire crowd struck him with such vehemence that he was overcome by curiosity. Supposing himself strong enough to despise whatever he saw and to conquer it, he opened his eyes. He was struck in the soul by a wound graver than the gladiator in his body, whose fall had caused the roar. The shouting entered by his ears and forced open his eyes. Thereby it was the means of wounding and striking to the ground a mind still more bold than strong, and the weaker for the reason that he presumed on himself when he ought to have relied on you. As soon as he saw the blood, he at once drank in savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted. He imbibed madness. Without any awareness of what was happening to him, he found delight in the murderous contest and was inebriated by bloodthirsty pleasure. He was not now the person who had come in, but just one of the crowd which he had joined, and a true member of the group which had brought him.

[8] St Augustine, *City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 589

> What should I add? He looked, he yelled, he was on fire, he took the madness home with him so that it urged him to return not only with those by whom he had originally been drawn there, but even more than them, taking others with him.[9]

For Augustine, it is characteristically human to find oneself out of one's own control – gripped by an illicit passion we would much rather be rid of, or inhibited by fears and anxieties from doing what we know we could, should and desperately want to do, for example. In those circumstances, the rationalist philosopher's appeal to our voluntary powers seems feeble and shallow. It is not that rationalism fails to recognise the existence of a tension between human reason and what we actually do, but its assumptions about human nature – the idea that consciously guided rational action is itself the best remedy for the limitations of rationality – lead it to such inadequate remedies. Either (with Plato) it emphasizes argument and reflection, or else (with Aristotle) the role of habit and training – high-minded talks in the headmaster's study or cold showers and cross-country running.[10]

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[9] St Augustine, *Confessions* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1991), pp. 100-101

[10] In this respect, the Aristotelian picture of human beings was not dramatically opposed to the Platonic: Aristotle, as much as Plato, depicts human beings as caught in a permanent struggle to overcome their affective side by means of their rational nature – a struggle to which they bring native endowments of varying amounts of discretionary power that they must try to increase. Aristotle, however, does give more emphasis to the role of custom and training in developing man's rational powers (although his conception of training is by no means behaviouristic and Plato, of course, did not wholly deny it any role) and he draws a distinction of principle (rather than merely one of degree) between practical reasoning and theoretical knowledge.

The consequence to be drawn if we believe both that the good life is one lived in accordance with reason and that reason is not enough to control the passions is simple: the pessimistic view that human beings are not made for happiness, in this life at least. This is Augustine's position. He fully endorses the primacy of reason over the passions – his ideal individual is the one who has withdrawn so far as possible from sensible pleasures and holds those that he does indulge in firmly under the hegemony of the will. But he does not make the assumption that what is higher in *value* is for that reason higher in *effective power* – that all we need to do is to counterpose calmly two rival claimants on our wills and the "experienced observer" will inevitably gravitate towards the "higher pleasures".[11] In fact, the presumption is just to the contrary: the only thing that can save us from the perversity of our corporeal and appetitive nature in relation to our wills is the mysterious beneficence of divine grace.

The Critique of Rationalism

Having thus sketched the contours of rationalism, I now turn to the more difficult (and, to be quite frank, more questionable) part of my paper: the task of articulating at least the outlines of a plausible critique of it. Surely, you might say, the near-unanimity that we find amongst the greatest thinkers of the Western tradition regarding the value of the rationalist ideal should show us

[11] The phrases are, of course, John Stuart Mill's.

that it is basically correct. The practical issue, then, is about the effective means (if there are any) for realizing that ideal, whilst the philosophical one concerns its metaphysical presuppositions and ethical implications. Moreover one would have to be blind not to see that the twentieth-century political movement that most consciously rejected the rationalist picture of human nature produced effects of unspeakable barbarism.

Nevertheless, and however tentatively, I should like to take up that challenge. At the same time, I should like to draw your attention to a current of thought about human nature that exists, for the most part, outside the main stream of the philosophical tradition but that is, I believe, no less worthy of our attention for that. The critique of rationalism that I will develop will have three main ingredients. First, I shall present a view according to which the rationalist ideal of increasing the discretionary power of choice vis-à-vis first-order desires is not appropriate. Next, I shall suggest that the pessimist's critique of the effectiveness of rationalist means is at least plausible. Finally, I shall develop a view according to which the use of rationalist means to develop self-control, to the extent that they *are* in fact effective, are damaging to attitudes and psychological states that human beings should value.

It will be recalled that the rationalist ideal as I presented it envisaged a situation in which human beings were able to reject or endorse any of their first-order desires as they wished. I left it open which, if any, they should endorse or reject, or in terms of what criteria they should do so. This was a

deliberate omission, for it is evident that rationalists divide deeply regarding just these issues. At one extreme is the idea – Kant is its most obvious protagonist – that first-order desires have no intrinsic value whatsoever, that their satisfaction is, at best, of instrumental value in the pursuit of what alone is good without qualification: the exercise of the free, rational will. For the utilitarian, at the other extreme, all first-order desires will participate to a greater or lesser degree in what alone can give value: the capacity to produce pleasure or to diminish pain. Yet, to the extent that the utilitarian would prefer us to "choose the line of greatest advantage instead of yielding in the direction of least resistance", she too will endorse the rationalist ideal of self-mastery.

Similarly, rationalists disagree fundamentally about the status of the criteria upon which first-order desires should be assessed. Frankfurt, as I understand him, is content that those desires that govern the free person's selection of her first-order desires should be ultimately subjective. Charles Taylor, on the other hand, in a well-known paper that is in part a response to Frankfurt, argues that such assessments at their best are best understood as exercises in deep self-reflection whose epistemology is that of discovery rather than choice.[12] Yet I take it that both Frankfurt and Taylor subscribe to the rationalist ideal.

[12] Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self", in G. Watson (ed.), *Free Will* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1982), pp. 111-26.

Is it Always Good to Increase the Power of Choice?

The first move that the anti-rationalist can make is to take issue with the rationalist's presumption that to weaken (by whatever means) the affective force of our first-order desires in favour of our ability to exercise our power of choice over such desires is, in general, a good thing. At this point I should like to make the argument more specific by illustrating it in terms of the ideas of the thinker who, it seems to me, presented the first comprehensive (if not always wholly consistent) anti-rationalist account of human nature, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

For Rousseau there is one first-order desire to weaken which in any way would be disastrous. This is the sentiment that he identifies under the name of *pitié* (sympathy):

> I do not think that I need fear contradiction in attributing to man the sole natural virtue that the most extreme detractor of human virtues would be forced to recognise. I am speaking of *pitié*, a disposition appropriate to creatures so feeble and subject to so many ills as ourselves; a virtue all the more universal and all the more useful to men for preceding in them the use of any reflection, and so natural that even the beasts at times show visible signs of it.[13]

Pitié is of extraordinary importance for Rousseau for it is the fountain-head of moral action. More than just an individual's passive reaction to the

[13] *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, pp. 196-97.

perception of suffering, *pitié* is both a feeling and a motivation to action; individuals who are gripped by *pitié* act morally, not because they *judge* from some impartial standpoint that it is right to act in that way, but out of regard for what are, in the end, their own feelings. It is a "tuistic" or "non-I" desire that is, at the same time, motivationally primitive: it is not a means to the advancement of a kind of self-interest that can be characterised in other terms. To weaken this feeling's power to move us without our choosing so to be moved would be to weaken morality, not to strengthen human freedom. Yet it is just this that has been the consequence of the advance of civilisation and the consequent development of reason, according to Rousseau:

> ... *pitié* will be all the more powerful, the more intimately the observing animal identifies itself with the suffering animal. Now it is evident that this identification must have been infinitely more close in the state of nature than in the state of reasoning. It is reason that engenders *amour-propre* [vain selfishness], and it is reflection that strengthens it; it is reason that turns man back upon himself; it is reason that separates him from everything that disturbs or afflicts him; it is philosophy that isolates him; through it he says, secretly, to the image of a suffering man: "Perish if you will, I am secure." Only the dangers that threaten society as a whole trouble the tranquil sleep of the philosopher and draw him from his bed.[14]

[14] *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, p. 198.

If we take Rousseau's point that *pitié* is a natural virtue, it follows that at least one first-order desire is ethically good. Hence any rationalist strategy of diminishing the force of first-order desires in favour of a general ideal of increasing the self's discretionary power of choice is not appropriate. We should not be in a position in which we are called upon to *choose* our response to another's suffering: it should be a natural and immediate reaction.

Scepticism about Rationalist Means

The second stage in the construction of a critique of rationalism starts by endorsing pessimism's scepticism regarding the effectiveness of the means chosen by rationalism to advance its ideal. During the discussion so far I have been speaking of the individual's first-order desires as if they were, as it were, a fixed inventory of psychological facts about that individual – facts that might exercise a greater or lesser tug in relation to that individual but which could be spoken of essentially in detachment from the individual's environment. Returning to the case of Alypius, however, it will be recalled that the key to the malign desire that takes hold of him against his will is a perception – in this case an auditory perception (the roar of the crowd that arouses Alypius's curiosity) followed by a visual perception. When Alypius *sees* the bloodthirsty acts in the amphitheatre that he becomes seized with passion – a passion that does not let him go after the event is over but brings him back to the games time and again.

Now if discursive reasoning about what is desirable is to be effective it presupposes that such links between perception (I mean *sense*-perception) and desire, stimulus and response, are sufficiently weak to be broken by discourse alone. Likewise, to the extent that a training in practical self-control is supposed to habituate us to acting in a way that ignores or overrides our perceptually stimulated desires, it assumes that the link between perception and desire will be sufficiently weak for self-denial to be an effective means of developing self-command.

The anti-rationalist thus sees a dilemma. Either rationalist means of weakening the connection between perception and desire are effective or they are not. If they are effective, then what of those cases where the connection between perception and desire is itself of great importance: where the perception of suffering generates *pitié* which acts, in turn, as a motivating internal reason for action? Will rationalism not destroy moral motivation? On the other hand, if rationalist means are ineffective, what is to say that undesirable desires will not return with undiminished force (as did Alypius's desire to see the games) once the individual once again faces the perceptual conditions that occasioned them initially?

It is, of course, logically possible that the situation is even worse than I have depicted it. It might be that rationalist means are sometimes effective and sometimes not, but that the scope of their effectiveness is exactly the reverse of what we would wish: that they break the connection between perception and

desire in the moral case but that, when it comes to undesirable desires, they are ineffective or even counter-productive. As a matter of fact, for reasons that would take me too far from my main argument to go into here, that is precisely Rousseau's view.

The outline of Rousseau's anti-rationalist position is by now, I hope, emerging. Not all first-order desires are equally good (or bad). Some – those that embody *pitié* – are good for a familiar reason: they incorporate concern for others. Others, in particular those that are generated by the vain selfishness that Rousseau calls "*amour-propre*", are bad, again for a familiar reason, namely, that they are self-multiplying and insatiable. Thus (although this is one of the pervasive myths about him) Rousseau is no *irrationalist*.

Nor is he a pessimist. Like Augustine, Rousseau challenges the idea that *reasoning* (the private and independent exercise of the power of reflection) is a suitable means to achieve moral rationality and self-command. Yet here the two part company, for, unlike Augustine, Rousseau does not believe that self-command is impossible, except by the miraculous means of divine grace. Rousseau believes that there *is* a rational order to the world and it is both discernible by human beings and capable of being followed by them – although to be able do so their reason must be (as Rousseau expresses it in *Émile*) "perfected by feeling".[15]) Our failures are the result of lives lived

[15] Perhaps surprisingly, Rousseau quite frequently uses the term "reason" in an affirmative sense, particularly in *Émile*. There Rousseau endorses the ideal that human beings should be ruled by reason rather than appetite; that reason is not

wrongly in societies that are badly arranged, not inevitable consequences of Man's Fall. Reason must be supported by feelings of the right kind. Such morally appropriate feelings are threatened by the withdrawal of the self into the private realm of subjectivity. Not only does the self-centred use of reflection, motivated by vain selfishness (*amour-propre*), fail as a means of moral self-improvement, but private subjectivity is pervaded by feelings that, unlike the moral emotion of *pitié*, are detached from practical engagement. For reason and feeling to be brought into agreement with one another, reasoning alone is not sufficient. As Rousseau puts it:

> Whilst it might be possible for Socrates and minds of his calibre to acquire virtue by means of reason, the human race would long ago have ceased to be if its conservation had been dependent solely on the reasonings of its members.[16]

As it happens, Rousseau addresses the issue of the connection between perception, feeling and right action at a rather unexpected point in his writings:

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redundant in the moral sphere ("Reason alone teaches us to know good and evil." (*Émile*, quoted in *The Indispensable Rousseau*, p.185.); and that mastery over the passions is a good thing (see *Émile,* Book 5).

It seems clear that, for Rousseau, "reason" has more than one sense. Affirmatively, it is the capacity to judge rightly, feel appropriately, and to match our actions to our feelings. Negatively, it is the exercise of reflection and speculation in abstraction from direct experience. It is all too easy, therefore, to suppose either (on the basis of his critical remarks) that Rousseau is an irrationalist, or, if the more positive statements are included, that he is simply confused.

[16] *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, p. 199.

in his autobiographical classic, the *Confessions*. He describes there the plans that he had for a book that he, in fact, failed to write:

> It has been observed that the majority of men are often in the course of their lives quite unlike themselves; they seem to be changed into quite different people. But it was not for the purpose of establishing such a well-known fact that I planned to write my book; I had a more original and important purpose, which was to trace the causes of these changes, isolating those that depend on us in order to show how we may ourselves control them, and so become better men and more certain of ourselves. For it is, indisputably, more difficult for a decent man to resist the desires he should subdue, once they are formed, than to prevent, change or modify these same desires at their source if he were in a position to go back so far. A man resists temptation once because he is strong, and succumbs on another occasion because he is weak, though if he had been in his previous state he would not have succumbed.
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> Looking within myself and seeking in others for the cause upon which these different states depended, I discovered that they had a great deal to do with our previous impressions from external objects, and that, being continually a little changed through the agency of our senses and our organs, we were unconsciously affected in our thoughts, our feelings, and even our actions by the impact of these slight changes

> upon us. Numerous striking examples that I had collected put the matter beyond all dispute; and thanks to their physical basis they seemed to me capable of providing an external code which, varied according to circumstances, could put or keep the mind in the state most conducive to virtue. From what errors would reason be preserved, and what vices would be choked even before birth, if one knew how to compel the brute functions to support the moral order which they so often disturb? Climates, seasons, sounds, colours, darkness, light, the elements, food, noise, silence, movements, repose: they all act on our machines, and consequently upon our souls, and they all offer us innumerable and almost certain opportunities for controlling those feelings which we allow to dominate us from their very onset... I made very little progress with this work, however, the title of which was *La Morale Sensitive ou le Matérialisme du sage.*[17]

Where Augustine considers the senses to be a permanent threat to the feeble defences of reason, for Rousseau, the world of the senses is not held to be inherently inimical to human rationality; nor is the remedy for incontinence the development of discursive reasoning or the dull repetition of habit, but the search for a healthy and balanced form of experience. Rousseau's aim is to develop “reason” (in the sense of the power of the self to perceive, feel and act rightly) by bringing it into balance with its environment.

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[17]. *Confessions*, pp. 380-81.

The Negative Consequences of Rationalist Techniques of Self-Command

I come now to the final part of my outline of a critique of rationalism. My first two points, made with aid of Rousseau, were (1) that the rationalist ideal of self-command threatens to break the important connection between moral perception and action and (2) that rationalist techniques may be ineffective against recalcitrant desires, particularly where such desires are triggered as a result of sense-perception. Yet someone might easily remain unimpressed by these considerations. Rationalist techniques are, she might argue, at least somewhat effective (and what more can we plausibly hope for?) whilst, on the other hand, there is no reason to suppose that an agent who achieves the ideal of rational self-command would, for that reason alone, be *disinclined* to accept the claims of morality: it is just that the connection between perception and moral action is no longer direct and unmediated by reflection. To such an objector, then, the last part of the argument will be of particular importance.

The argument has the following structure:

(1) It is argued that rationalism (that is, the employment of rationalist techniques and the endorsement of a rationalist ideal for the self) does indeed have practical effects, even if these are not the achievement of the rationalist ideal of self-command. These effects amount to the establishment of a certain personality or character-type, the *rationalist self*.

(2) The effect of the rationalist self is to cause the self's experience to lose at least part of its intrinsic value. The claim is that certain kinds of experience, like *pitié,* have value not just in promoting a good end (motivating moral action) but intrinsically.

Once again, I shall focus the discussion by presenting it through the thought of an anti-rationalist thinker, in this case, the novelist Stendhal and his book *De l'amour*. The book turns on a distinction between two types of lover and the different experiences that they have of love. The distinction is epitomized in the contrast between two fictional characters: Goethe's Werther and Don Juan. Each represents a different character type. Don Juan is the type of the active, goal-directed individual. He lives his life under the domination of his ongoing projects. Insofar as he responds to the outer world with his feelings, those feelings are positive or negative insofar as what he encounters favours or obstructs his ends. For the Don Juan, according to Stendhal, "Love... is a feeling akin to a taste for hunting. It is a craving for an activity that needs an incessant diversity of stimuli to challenge skill."[18] Don Juan is a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of rationalism.

Werther, on the other hand, is the passive, sensitive lover. His feelings are essentially responses, inasmuch as he allows his perceptions of value to be given to him – unexpectedly and, at times, quite irrationally – in the context of his love. The Wertherian lover sees the world *as a lover does*. That is, he sees

reality in a certain way *because* he is in love. Yet, in contrast to the Don Juan, he does not see the world simply as a means towards the satisfaction of his desires. Stendhal's key idea is that sensitive love makes possible a kind of imaginative perception: what he calls "crystallization", based on an analogy that he repeats several times in the book:

> At the salt-mines of Salzburg, they throw a leafless wintry bough into one of the abandoned workings. Two or three months later they haul it out covered with a shining deposit of crystals. The smallest twig, no bigger than a tom-tit's claw, is studded with a galaxy of scintillating diamonds. The original branch is no longer recognizable.
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> What I have called crystallization is a mental process which draws from everything that happens new proofs of the perfection of the loved one.[19]

The imagination, in other words, enriches and beautifies the world for us; it gives the sensitive lover's experience a value that it would not otherwise have, even if it leads to actions and judgements that would seem to the outsider demeaning or absurd.[20] Don Juan, by contrast, can never experience this enrichment of the world.[21]

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[18] Stendhal, *Love*, translated by G. and S. Sale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) p. 209.
[19] *Love,* p.45
[20] "Passionate love spreads all Nature in her sublimity before a man's eyes, like something invented only yesterday. He is surprised never to have noticed the strange sights he now perceives. Everything is new, alive, and pulsating with the most passionate interest. A lover sees the woman he loves in every skyline,

> Unlike Werther, for whom realities are shaped by his desires, Don Juan's desires are imperfectly satisfied by cold reality, as in ambition, avarice and other passions. Instead of losing himself in the bewitching reveries of crystallization his attitude is that of a general to the success of his tactics, and in brief he destroys love instead of enjoying it more than others, as is commonly believed.[22]

Although Werther perceives the world as containing values, it is not that his valuings are claimed to be objectively correct – as Stendhal makes clear, they are subjective and, perhaps, to the outsider, wholly unintelligible. Yet that is not Stendhal's point. What gives those valuings their value is not their objective truth but the fact that such a mode of perception has an affective richness and depth that itself gives value to the individual's experience. From the Don Juan's point of view, Werther's valuations serve no overriding end. Nevertheless, Stendhal has no hesitation in declaring that a Werther is happier than a Don Juan, for the latter "reduces love to the level of an ordinary affair".[23]

Rationalism, to the extent that it encourages the production of character-types such as Don Juan at the expense of Werther, leads to a loss of

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and as he travels a hundred leagues to catch a momentary glimpse of her each tree, each rock speaks to him in a different way and teaches him something new about her." *Love,* p. 209.

[21] "Instead of the tumult of these magical visions, Don Juan requires that external objects, which he values only in proportion to their utility, should be given piquancy by some new intrigue." *Love,* p. 209.

[22] *Love,* p. 206

value, the anti-rationalist claims. Yet what is particularly significant is that the criteria for the assessment of value available from within the rationalist tradition of ethical thought provide no clear way of registering this loss. Does the Don Juan undergo fewer pleasurable experiences than the Werther? Probably not. Does he satisfy fewer of his desires? Quite possibly not. Are his first-order desires less consonant with the discretionary power of his will? Certainly not. Has he developed fewer of his powers? No. Are the long-term projects in terms of which he frames his life less ambitious, coherent and well realized? Again, it would seem not. So why, then, should someone think that he is worse off?

The history of Western philosophy offers us a huge diversity of answers regarding the nature of human well-being (I made reference to a few of them in the previous paragraph). Yet it is significant that, according to many of those criteria, it is the Don Juan who appears to be leading the more successful life. According to Stendhal, the Don Juan is simply "less happy": his experience is qualitatively inferior. Yet philosophy's received notions of what makes life valuable seem to be incapable of registering that fact. I do not suppose, however, that I am alone in finding Stendhal's case for the superior value of the sensitive lover's experience over that of the Don Juan perfectly intelligible – indeed persuasive. If this is something that ethical theory has

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[23] *Love,* p. 206

difficulty in accounting for, then the problem lies on the side of philosophy, it seems to me.