

'Rationality' and 'Rationalities' within the Framework of the Modernism–Postmodernism Debate

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Not only ways of behavior are objects of value judgments,¹ but words as well. The term 'rational' is such a word: to be rational is good. This is probably the reason why, as a reaction to so-called 'western rationality', people started speaking of many 'rationalities', a claim propounded especially by postmodernists during the past few decades.

I shall not dwell here on the historical developments that led to such a claim. I shall confine myself to scrutinizing concepts relevant to the topic of this colloquium, within their intellectual framework: the modernist–postmodernist debate.

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'Modern', initially the relative term of 'ancient', 'traditional', 'classical', etc., denoting the latest way of doing or making something – whatever it be – mostly a way introduced in a revolutionary manner up against the traditional one and then generalized at a given point in time; in other words, a term denoting the new way valid at a given moment gets ascribed to itself, with the passage of time, its own special yet ambiguous content, intended to denote one particular usage.

In western circles the term 'modern' appears to denote a special totality of characteristics reflected in various human activities and their products: the period in which such characteristics are seen while carrying out this or that activity and in its products – and of course diachronically – is called modern. 'Modern philosophy', for example, according to Bochenski, is the 'philosophical thought of the period between 1600–1900',² while 'modern art' starts around 1900.

Thus the term 'modernity' (in English, *modernité* in French, and *die Moderne* in German), a concept debated upon in the past few decades, seems to denote a historical period in which a given world-view, marked by its rupture with the past, prevails

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(or else, how could the term 'postmodernity' be coined?); but also a rupture with the past in general, or '*une crise par rapport à la tradition*',³ i.e. the confrontation of a 'new' world-view with a traditional one. What is, in fact, this 'given' world-view? And where do we find such ruptures?

The debate on modernity, going on in the West, betrays a reaction against the positive value judgement concerning 'modernity' as a world-view, though it is not clear against which world-view.

Yet the debate going on in many non-western countries is not on modernity, but on modernization. This is an old debate, which started in a category of non-western countries at the beginning of the 20th century, in some of them even before, and which is still going on. 'Modern' as a constituent part of the word 'modernization' denoted until recently the state of affairs in the West; and as an epithet the way of doing things 'as they were done' in the West; or, where an individual is concerned, his 'possessing western mentality' – in fact, different mentalities, all shaped in the history of the geographical West, including the USA.

Here we see that, what was considered in western circles to be modern, was something – whatever it was – historically new, while in non-western circles, something – whatever it was – new for them only.

Thus modernization, equated with westernization, has been a permanent item on the agenda of certain non-western countries, of those which had themselves opted for modernization; and though we see many discrepant answers concerning what has to be 'taken' from the West, westernization was always considered to be something 'good' and necessary for the survival of these societies. The debates going on in many such countries during the past few decades betray a reaction against equating modernization with westernization, and the attempt to divorce them.

Here I shall not trace the lines of global developments which have caused this change in the conception of modernization and in the prevailing positive value judgement concerning 'westernization' in the relevant non-western circles, and which have also brought 'the question of modernity' to the fore in the West.⁴ I shall only try to show how the claim emerged that there are 'many rationalities'; by means of which conceptual confusions arose; and to point out a few needs.

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Modernity, considered historically as a rupture with the world-view and conception (or image) of Man prevailing in the Middle Ages, is often equated with Enlightenment, but not infrequently with 'rationality' – understood as a way, any way, of explaining and justifying things non-metaphysically – and recently was equated with what is called 'western rationality', from which is understood a special approach in explaining and justifying things.

Let us first lend an ear to Kant's answer, given in 1784 – that is 218 years ago – to the question 'What is Enlightenment?': 'Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's own intelligence without being guided by another. *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own

intelligence is therefore the motto of the enlightenment' and 'primarily in matters of religion'.

Through laziness and cowardice a large part of mankind, even after nature has freed them from alien guidance, gladly remain immature. It is because of laziness and cowardice that it is easy for others to usurp the role of guardians. It is comfortable to be a minor! If I have a book which provides meaning for me, a pastor who has conscience for me, a doctor who will judge my diet for me and so on, then I do not need to exert myself. I do not have any need to think if I can pay, others will take over this tedious job for me. The guardians who have kindly undertaken the supervision will see to it that by far the largest part of mankind, including the entire 'beautiful sex', should consider the step into maturity, not only as difficult but as very dangerous.⁵

Here we see that 'enlightenment' is understood as the capacity 'to use one's own intelligence without the guidance of another' or 'to judge by one's own means', on anything, including questions of value and values. Secularism is one of the ideas of the Enlightenment; and it is noteworthy that 'secular', etymologically, means 'proper to the *saeculum*', 'proper to the age'.

This Kantian conception of enlightenment does not seem connected with what is called now 'rationality' or 'western rationality', which appears to be marked rather by the Hegelian conception of reason, as well as by Comte's positivism, according to which human thought reaches its maturity in its third stage of development, in which Man explains natural phenomena not 'theologically' or 'metaphysically', but through observation and experiment, or by 'positive science'.

Modernity, as a historical period, covers all these conceptions. Yet behind both pragmatism and Marxism – two ideologies whose fight marked the historical and intellectual developments is the 20th century – we don't see enlightenment, but plain or western rationality, in the sense I mentioned above. Pragmatism, as an ideology, is characterized by a conception of Man and morals which are the product of two incompatible value imputations to Man: the religionist and the positivist conception of Man, which both evaluate man's potentialities in an unbalanced way. Among its mottoes we find pluralism and tolerance – the latter understood in a way different from that of the Enlightenment, as William James's 'corridor' for example. Marxist ideology, on the other hand, was characterized by having cut off Marx's ideas, developed more than a hundred years ago, from their sources, i.e. Marx's conception of Man and value, and put them, without noticing it, together with positivism's conception of Man and its 'value-free' science and action.

Thus we see that these two ideologies, which marked the political climate of the 20th century, though different perhaps in all other aspects, they share (a) the same antimetaphysical or positivistic world-view – the 'scientific world conception'; (b) the same positivistic conception of Man – the image of Man without face, as I call it; and (c) the same practical metaprinciple of action – the 'everything is permitted' principle.

Let us here focus a little on this 'scientific world-view', since the debate on modernity and rationality appears to be closely connected with this view, and let us

focus on its latest, still 73-year-old expression: 'the scientific conception of the world' as formulated by the Vienna Circle in 1929.

In the 'manifesto' of the Vienna Circle, prepared in order to be presented to Moritz Schlick as a 'token of gratitude and joy at his remaining in Vienna', signed by Hans Hahn, Otto Neurath and Rudolf Carnap, we read among other things: the scientific world conception is characterized

. . . essentially by two features. First it is empiricist and positivist: there is knowledge only from experience, which rests on what is immediately given. This sets limits for the content of legitimate science. Second the scientific world-conception is marked by application of a certain method, namely logical analysis. The aim of scientific effort is to reach the goal, unified science, by applying logical analysis to the empirical material . . . If such an analysis were carried through for all concepts, they would thus be ordered into a reductive system, a 'constitutive system'. Investigations towards such a constitutive system, the 'constitutive theory', thus form the framework within which logical analysis is applied by the scientific world-conception . . .

The representatives of the scientific world-conception resolutely stand on the ground of simple human experience. They confidently approach the task of removing the metaphysical and theological debris of millennia. . . . Thus, the scientific world-conception is close to the life of the present . . . We witness the spirit of the scientific world-conception penetrating in growing measure the forms of personal and public life, in education, upbringing, architecture, and the shaping of economic and social life according to rational principles. The scientific world-conception serves life, and life receives it.⁶

These are the last sentences of the neopositivistic 'manifesto', in which we find expressed the assumptions and expectations of a so-called scientific conception of the world, and of its 'value-free' science. This seems to be the world-view to which 'rationality' was equated, and against which the claim was raised that this is 'western rationality', i.e. only one rationality, in other words, one world-view among other ones. The criticism exercised upon modernity – or western rationality – seems to have in mind such a world-conception.

Now, if we look at this equivalence between rationality, the scientific conception of the world and western rationality, constructed the wrong way, we see that we are faced with one claim which is true in itself, one wrong equivalence and at least one wrong conclusion: i.e. we see that the scientific world conception is, indeed, only one world-view among others, but its equation with rationality is a wrong one, as is also wrong the conclusion subsequently deduced from this equation, that there are many 'rationalities' – though it is true that there are many world-views.

What does 'rationality' or 'rational' indeed mean? 'Rational' means 'being in conformity with reason'. What, then, is 'reason'? It is a human capacity to which in the history of philosophy different functions are ascribed. Philosophers speak of theoretical, practical, technical, dialectical and other reason(s).

Going through these functions carefully – from Plato to Sartre – we observe that reason appears to be mainly the capacity, or formal activity, of: connecting given premises, in accordance with so-called principles or laws of reason; or the capacity to make a deduction from given premises in various ways and come to a conclusion – still from premises of different epistemic characteristics and of different epistemic

value. For example, justifying (*begründen*) a claim is nothing else but stating the premises wherefrom that claim was deduced; explaining a claim – by somebody else – is finding the premises wherefrom he or she deduced that claim, i.e. stating or finding the 'why's, the reasons, of that claim. The problems concerning the epistemic specificity of these premises, or the specificity of the given 'reasons' which are put forth by quite different activities of knowing are quite different from those concerning reasoning or justifying and explaining given claims.

The debate about rationality and rationalities seems to revolve around problems concerning not reason or reasoning, but the epistemic specificity of the premises of reasoning, or the given 'reasons'. 'Non-metaphysical' justifications or explanations of claims are considered to be 'rational'. Yet what is considered to be 'non-metaphysical' shows a great variety.

Now, when we look at propositions used as premises for reasoning or deduction, from the viewpoint of their epistemic specificity, we see that some of them are propositions of knowledge, i.e. that they possess an object independent from those who put them forth; or that they are propositions – general, particular, singular propositions – expressing a thought (for example a thought connected with an 'ought', a 'may', etc.), deduced, in different ways, either from knowledge or from other kinds of statements. Knowledge has to do not only with nature or the so-called 'external world'; anything, all human products included, i.e. also ideas, concepts, values, actions, activities, etc., can be objectified, i.e. can become an object of knowledge.

Logical empiricism has reduced all knowledge only to propositions which 'rest on the immediately given', which are of course knowledge, but not its only kind, and made out of this reduction an approach to be used in all areas of human endeavour. This approach is mainly what is called 'the scientific conception of the world', which was apparently equated first with 'rationality' and then with 'western rationality', which is now the object of total or partial criticism, under the name of modernity – a criticism which, nevertheless, shares its 'value-free' approach.

But what does it mean for 'science', or anything else, to be 'value-free'? It seems, so far as I can see, to denote its being 'free' – independent – from the prevailing general moral value judgements – the goods and the bads – of a culture.

Lack of philosophical knowledge concerning value and values, and the equation of value with value judgements and of values with norms, on which I shall not dwell here,⁷ seems to be another factor which led to questioning rationality and to the claim of many rationalities.

Thus modernity – the rupture with the medieval tradition, i.e. the prevailing Christian world-view, conception of Man and conception of morals – equated with the latest widespread world-view and conception of Man in the West, in spite of the fact that as historical period it includes also Enlightenment, marked by secularism, the idea of human dignity, human rights and such other ideas, has led some thinkers in the West (and it is noteworthy to mention that most of them are French thinkers) to criticize and reject 'modernity', and some others to a milder criticism, i.e. to point at the need to revise it.

Therefore, science as a world-view and its consequences, the loss of the object of knowledge in epistemology⁸ and its consequences, and the lack of philosophical knowledge concerning value, values and norms, coupled with the historical events

during and after the Second World War and especially with their outcome during the recent decades – some so-called global problems: pollution, arms-race, etc. – have shaken the belief in rationality in the West, and the belief in ‘western rationality’ at global level. The all-increasing presence of Asia and Africa in intellectual and political debates has also contributed to this change.

We have to get rid of the positive value judgement that ‘rationality’ or ‘being rational’ is good. In fact there are many world-views and conceptions of the good life (*Weltanschauungen, Lebensanschauungen*), which are constituents of different cultures and can be evaluated by asking the question of how much they promote human flourishing.

But there is also knowledge – not only scientific knowledge, but different kinds of knowledge, i.e. propositions that possess an object independent of those who put them forth as a result of an objectification, and consequently they are verifiable–falsifiable.

The universalist–anti-universalist debate going on at present in connection with human rights is also the result of the conflict I already mentioned. For, the anti-universalist claim that there is no universal or universalizable world-view or conception of the good life is true; while it is false when this same claim is ascribed to clearly conceived human rights – provided that from the ‘universality of human rights’ we don’t understand their being valid everywhere (globally), or their being accepted by everybody, but we understand their being demands concerning the treatment of each and every human being – independently of his or her natural or contingent specificities – so that every human being be not hindered from actualizing and developing his or her human potentialities and capacities. This is the reason why human rights should be made valid globally, i.e. in all countries of the world.

To deal with the problems of our times we need clear philosophical–conceptual knowledge. Thus, instead of spending our efforts in order to defend one of these sides in debate, we need to settle accounts with the philosophical views which underlie these debates. We need new philosophical knowledge. We need an epistemology beyond the positivistic and postmodernist ones – one which distinguishes, not between science and metaphysics, but between knowledge and the other products of the human mind; an ontology, which has overcome the ‘great reduction’ of Being into one of its species, an ontology beyond the dualism of the physical and metaphysical; an anthropology which does not deal with images or conceptions of Man, but with the specificities of the human being, which include also his potentialities; and an ethics, which is neither normative nor meta-ethics, but which goes beyond these approaches and objectifies the ethical human phenomenon, on the basis of clear conceptual knowledge of value and values.

If we are persuaded that ‘all human beings are equal in dignity and rights’, and if we wish to contribute to ‘the creation of a world free from fear and want’, one specific job for philosophers is to scrutinize the concepts and conceptions underlying the global problems we are faced with and the debates related to these problems, as is the case with the debate on ‘rationality’ and ‘rationalities’.

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Notes

1. Such as 'smoking in the presence of elderly people is bad', 'telling the truth is good'.
2. I. M. Bochenski, *Contemporary European Philosophy*, translated from the German by Donald Nicholl and Karl Aschenbrenner, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1959, p. 1.
3. 'La modernité en problème', *Autrement*, no. 102, November 1983, p. 17.
4. For this point, see Ioanna Kuçuradi, 'Cultural Morals and Global Morality in the Light of Ethics', in *Proceedings of WASCO 88: The World Community in Post-industrial Society*, Seoul, 1989, pp. 176–85.
5. 'What is Enlightenment', trans. Carl J. Friedrich, in *The Philosophy of Kant*, Modern Library, 1949, p. 132 f. and p. 138 f.
6. 'The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle', Dordrecht, Holland, D. Reidel, 1973.
7. For this point, see Ioanna Kuçuradi, *Etik (Ethics)*, Ankara, Philosophical Society of Turkey, 1999, pp. 169–92.
8. For this point, see Ioanna Kuçuradi, 'Introduction', in Ioanna Kuçuradi and Robert C. Cohen (eds), *The Concept of Knowledge*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science 170, Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995, pp. ix–xv.