Appeals to reason as a faculty—or to rationality as a behaviour—often unnerve me because in my experience the appeals tend to be arbitrary or designed to intimidate. Here are three examples. First, when I was a child, whenever my mother wasn’t getting her own way, she demanded I be “reasonable”. Of course I always obeyed her. Looking back, however, I have no doubt—if I had the cheek to ask her what the demand had to do with reason—she would have gone ballistic. Second, if you look at the way many if not most positivists conduct themselves, they are a lot like my mother. They demand reason. They insist those who don’t agree with them are irrational. They ascribe false positions to anyone foolish enough to go a few rounds with them. Third, early in 2012, I attended a debate on whether Australia should become a republic, and, as far as I could see, the republicans made only two points during the debate: first, opposing a republic is against our national values; second, those who want to keep our current constitutional arrangements lack reason.

So, it’s quite simple really. Reason is something you have and your straw opponents don’t have. Rational is something you are and your imaginary enemies aren’t.

What is reason? How is it defined and measured? Not many Westerners realise their thinking about reason is a variation on a classical theme which hasn’t changed much over the millennia. Plato believed the mind has a tripartite structure (rational, spirited, appetitive) analogous with different parts of the body (head, heart, lower abdomen). This classical structure—which was once regarded as scientific—represents a hierarchy of truths we can see in Plato’s Republic. Presumably, because it comes from the rational part of the mind, he believed philosophy had higher truth claims. Presumably, because they are inspired by the spirited part of the mind, he believed poetry and rhetoric had lesser truth claims. But there’s an irony here. While he championed the truth claims of philosophy over those of poetry and rhetoric, he was also a poet and a rhetorician, not only a philosopher, and, strictly speaking, he was being rhetorical when championing these claims. He banned the poets from his ideal republic because their poetry didn’t represent the highest form of truth, because it came from the mind’s spirited part, not its rational part, because it was a shadow of the truth. Poets made up stories, told lies, traded copies of copies. Poets weren’t philosophers.

In the nineteenth century, coincidental with the theory of evolution, concurrent with the crisis of religious belief, this classical Greek model, arranged as it was around rationality–irrationality, began to compete with a cultural–animal model, arranged as it was around evolution and positivism, although it’s fair to notice that these models are similar: they mirror and depend on each other. The cultural mind became a new way of representing rationality. The animal mind became a new way of representing irrationality. The interesting thing about this new model—apart from being a rebranding of the old model—is that its proponents also claimed it to be scientific, according to one of the many fluctuating definitions of science fashionable at different periods during the last two centuries. Every era has its own sense of what is scientific, and therefore reasonable, which allows it to exclude whatever it doesn’t regard as scientific, and therefore unreasonable.

Freudianism is a good example of this phenomenon, since it moved between the old model of mind and the new, promoted itself as scientific, and dominated the twentieth century; until psychiatry redefined itself in relation to psychoanalysis; until our present understanding of the clinical science of the mind (or brain) could no longer accommodate Freud. Of course, this doesn’t mean Freudianism isn’t true. It means we’re obliged to consider what kind of truth it is. Thinking in purely Platonic terms, we’d have to say for much of the twentieth century Freudianism was a truth of the highest order, a philosophical (or rational) truth, but now it’s become a truth of the lower order,
a mythopoetic (or rhetorical) truth. This demotion, even if it’s in purely Platonic terms, wouldn’t have pleased those omnipresent Freudians who cast their dark shadows over the twentieth century, who had immense power over individuals and society, whose diagnoses of neuroses and complexes were once regarded as relevant but are now regarded as irrelevant.

The same applies to anything and everything for which truth claims are made; whether it be metaphysical or positivist; whether it be philosophical or poetic or rhetorical; claims that have to be tested according to some sort of agreed criteria. If even part of the text involves an appeal to reason as a faculty—or to rationality as a behaviour—we can’t simply demand reason or rationality. We are obliged to consider what reason or rationality is. That means some kind of overview of the history of reason from classical Greece to the present.

If it’s to be comprehensive, the overview should distinguish between what occurred before the Enlightenment, during the Enlightenment, and after the Enlightenment. It should cover classical metaphysics: that is, the synthesis of Greek reason and Biblical revelation which dominated the West for centuries. It should also cover the critique of classical metaphysics; a critique that has been simultaneously post-metaphysical (in the religious sense) and anti-metaphysical (in the positivist sense) depending on the socio-political agenda or academic research program of those who conduct the critique. Classical metaphysics was teleological, which means it studied the design in (or purpose of) natural phenomena, in order to explain those phenomena; it believed in a purposeful development towards an end (a telos), whether in nature or in history; it identified reason (the word or logos) with nature and the universe; that is, reason was seen as part of the natural and universal order of things. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1) was simply a restatement of “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

Classical metaphysics remained influential until the Enlightenment and during the Enlightenment. This point is significant, as many atheists or positivists erroneously claim the Enlightenment for themselves. In fact, the Enlightenment regarded Judeo-Christian revelation as entirely reasonable, although it began to question what reason is or ought to be; whether it’s subjective; what its full range of forms are; whether we ought to maintain a healthy scepticism towards its truth claims; what it means to live a life according to reason.

Some philosophers of the Enlightenment—but not all of them—began to challenge the classical metaphysical understanding of nature as teleological and humanity as having a telos. Nature was no longer assumed to be rational and humans were no longer assumed to be exceptional; all things whether animate or inanimate were subject to the same laws. Descartes saw humans as “thinking things” rather than “rational animals”, no different from all other “thinking things”. Hume argued that “reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities, according to their particular situations and relations”.

Kant attempted to show that Hume was wrong by demonstrating that a “transcendental” self was a necessary condition of all experience; he believed that in a free society each individual should pursue their goals, however they see fit, so long as their actions conformed to the principles given by reason.

In the post-Enlightenment period, as the philosophical debate followed its own (perhaps inevitable) trajectory, and moved further away from classical metaphysics, further towards the left, we see attempts to reformulate reason in post-metaphysical or anti-metaphysical ways. Habermas suggests that, because (he believed) the “substantive unity” of reason has dissolved in modern and postmodern times, it can no longer answer the question, “How should I live?” Instead, he divides reason into three strictly formal, procedural and autonomous spheres: cognitive-instrumental reason is the kind employed by the sciences; moral-practical reason is what we use to deliberate and discuss issues in the moral and political realm according to universalisable procedures; aesthetic reason is typically found in works of art and literature, and encompasses the novel ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Foucault suggests other forms of reason, neglected but essential to modern life and our understanding of what it means to live a life according to reason. Taylor, influenced by Heidegger, suggests that reason ought to include the faculty of “disclosure” as a new “department” of reason bound up with the way we make sense of things in everyday life. While these suggestions have been enormously influential—in those periods
we call modern and postmodern—how helpful have they been?

At this point—given the wide-ranging critique of reason in the modern and postmodern periods—can we advocate a return to classical metaphysics? As one would expect, the former pope, Benedict XVI, believes we should. In suggesting why, he draws upon his immensely astute research program—which spanned over half a century, and isn’t as widely understood (or as widely appreciated) as it ought to be—to remind us of fundamental things about classical metaphysics we seem to have lost sight of. First, Christianity is the religion of reason (the logos). Second, Judaism experienced a high-level rapprochement between logos and revelation during the Hellenistic Period, after which it became contrary to God’s nature to act without logos. However, in the late Middle Ages, Benedict says, trends in theology sundered this synthesis of logos and revelation. In response to the intellectualism of Augustine and Aquinas, there arose a voluntarism—a belief that morality comes from God’s will rather than his logos—which led to unorthodox claims that his otherness, his omnipotence, was so exalted that our reason was no longer an authentic mirror of his logos.

Having admitted this voluntarism as a (perhaps unfortunate) historical fact, Benedict observes a disturbing movement in Western theology since; a movement to “de-Hellenise” Western religion; that is, a movement to treat logos as Greek and exclude Judeo-Christian revelation from reason. He described the different stages of this movement—and what disturbs him about each stage—in his widely misrepresented and misunderstood Regensburg Lecture of September 2006.

Benedict points out several problems in this attempt to de-Hellenise Western religion. First, it had the effect of gradually separating theology from philosophy. The consequence of this separation is that philosophy has increasingly defined reason (and science) in limited ways and increasingly denied faith access to its limited definitions. Second, it has presented Jesus as the father of a humanist and humanitarian moral message rather than the second person of the Logos. The consequence of this humanism and humanitarianism is that philosophy has come to regard any question about God (or about metaphysics generally) as unscientific and irrational.

Benedict says his critique of the de-Hellenisation of Western religion—his critique of the critique of reason—has nothing to do with putting the clock back to a time before the Enlightenment, or rejecting the marvellous insights of the modern and postmodern periods, and everything to do with broadening our concept of reason and its application. We will succeed in doing so only if the West overcomes its self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable or falsifiable; only if reason and faith are allowed to come together once again. The West, he says, has long been endangered by an aversion to the questions which its positivism denies and it can only suffer great harm as a result.

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**Patience**

Playing at solitaire beside an open window
I let the weather slide away—
tall summer trees, bird-song,
the kids on bicycles—
and slip instead into a world of cards
as welcoming, sweet and solitary
as dreams of travel or clear alcohol—
a life as unredeemable
and lifeless as these kings and queens.

*David Chandler*