

Reason Gone Mad

Extricating Thought from Liberalism and Technocracy

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We are here today to talk about a couple of topics: the isolation of the individual from his own past and from society by naturalism, and the obstacles to rediscovering the path to sanity. I'll be talking about something that I believe lies behind those things, the modern idea of reason: its nature, origins, effects, strong points, weaknesses, and remedies.

1 Modern reason

Today I'm going to get to basics. It's basic that if you don't know what sanity is you're going to have a hard time finding it. It's also basic that if there's something really wrong with how reason is understood there's going to be something odd about accepted ideas of what's sane.

So I'm going to talk about the modern understanding of

1. **Reason:** how we should think if we want to get reliable results that make sense.
2. **Politics:** how we should act in political, social, and moral affairs.

The two—reason and politics, thought and action—are of course closely related. In what I say I'll mostly take the view that politics follows from reason. You start with what makes sense and that

determines how you act. Other views are possible, but you can't present all possibilities at once.

What I call "Reason Gone Mad" is basically the attempt to take a useful but only partial version of reason, scientific reason, and push it too far. The result is that we deal with everything technologically. That attempt leads to the things John, Chris, and Dino have talked about.

1. Technology reflects the universality of modern natural science. As such, it abolishes history and all particular connections. A computer would work the same in all settings, it doesn't care what you program it to do, and it can equally interact with any other computer anywhere.

The technological outlook therefore puts us in a sort of eternal now without past, place, context, or future, in which everything becomes a neutral resource for the achievement of the current projects of whoever is in control.

2. Technology doesn't recognize Being, just Power. It's only concern is our ability to get what we want, which it defines as our liberty. The "Empire of Liberty" thereby truly becomes, as Chris would have it, the Empire of Nothingness.
3. With respect to its self-representation in architecture, technological society produces mono-functionally zoned cities emblematic of values-free material production.
4. On the level of fantasy, which technological society encourages because it's so boring. and because it treats human goals as utterly arbitrary, it brings us blobitecture that pretends to encourage each of us to invent his own laws governing the universe. [The preceding phrases are due to Dino.]

As we shall see, it also gives us liberalism as we now have it.

1.1 History

There are lots of ways to tell the story, but you have to start somewhere. So with that in mind we can look at the modern idea of

reason as something that starts or at least finds clear expression with René Descartes and Francis Bacon.

1. **Descartes** wanted to have knowledge that would stand up against any possible doubt. So he tried to doubt everything so he could see what was left over and build knowledge out of that. He was the man who said "*cogito ergo sum.*" He couldn't doubt his own experience, so that's what he wanted build knowledge out of.
2. **Bacon** was the practically-minded one. He wanted to reconstruct knowledge on experimental principles for "the relief of man's estate." He said "knowledge is power."

So the modern view, if you put the two together, is that knowledge should be as **skeptical** as possible. We should be critical and not take anything on faith. We should build knowledge and our whole way of acting as much as possible on our own experience. And the purpose of knowledge is **practical**. It has to do with getting what we want.

You can trace what's happened to knowledge in what's happened to the word "**speculation**":

1. c.1374, "contemplation, consideration," from O.Fr. speculation, from L.L. speculatio "contemplation, observation," from L. speculatus, pp. of speculari "observe," from specere "to look at, view."
2. Disparaging sense of "mere conjecture" is recorded from 1575.
3. Meaning "buying and selling in search of profit from rise and fall of market value" is recorded from 1774.@

[From the Online Etymology Dictionary:]

So "speculation"—knowledge that does not emphasize taking hold of reality in a practical way— has gone from man's noblest faculty, speculative reason or contemplation, to making stuff up, to an unreliable way of making money based on gambling.

1.2 Basic Principles

As I've said, by "reason gone mad" I mean overgrown technological reason—the attempt to make something like scientific thought the whole of reason. The idea seems to be that if knowledge can't be perfectly clear and demonstrable it's not knowledge at all. The tendency that makes science the only knowledge and so turns it into a comprehensive view of all things, and thus a sort of religion, is sometimes called **scientism**.

Scientism limits reason to a very few things:

1. **Disinterested observation** that can be carried out by any properly trained observer. Reason should be based on things that are common to all. Defining the factual basis of knowledge as careful disinterested observation seems to be a way of nailing that down.
2. **Formal logic**, including mathematics.
3. **Measurement**. In order for observation to give you something formal logic can work on you have to measure. Qualities—good, bad, beautiful, ugly—don't tell you anything. They are just feelings.
4. **Means/ends rationality**. Knowledge is prediction. That means knowledge is knowledge of how events depend on other events, especially other events we can control. As a result, what we can know to be true and what is useful are very closely related.
5. Where those things are insufficient by themselves to answer questions, you have **Occam's Razor**. Occam's Razor says you make the minimum addition to what the other 4 points give you that lets you deal with whatever is at hand. You stick as closely as possible to observable facts and measurements, and to existing theories that work.

Occam's Razor turns out to be surprisingly important. When someone tells you "that's just your opinion" or "you're just trying to force your values on other people" it's an appeal to Occam's Razor.

The idea is that we've already got a perfectly functional system of knowledge—modern natural science and technology—and you're appealing to something outside that system and so taking what makes sense and adding something extraneous.

1.3 Scope of Knowledge

If we take those principles to heart, it turns out that we know just those things that modern natural science knows. They are:

1. Things that can be **observed and measured** by any trained observer who follows the appropriate procedures.
2. Things that are connected to observations by a **theory** that makes predictions and so can be tested, and is as simple, mathematical, and consistent with other accepted theories as possible.

That, as far as the present-day view of reason goes, is that. That's what knowledge is, and anything beyond it is not knowledge. It's opinion or feeling or taste or prejudice. Knowledge of the good and beautiful is not knowledge. Contemplation is not knowledge. Knowledge is experimental and oriented toward control, while contemplation does not affect what it contemplates. So contemplation can only be a psychological technique. Science tells you so.

Fantasy, however, is free. Human goals are arbitrary—fact and value are absolutely distinct—so as long as there aren't any claims of knowledge, and you're just talking about what you want or what you're going to do with things or what spin you're going to put on things, unbridled subjectivity can be your guide. That's why the modern outlook oscillates between radical objectivity and radical subjectivity: between science and fantasy, industrial discipline and libertine indulgence, careerism and rebelliousness.

1.4 Virtues

The principles of scientific thought seem to have a very limited focus. They are designed to deal with objects and forces in space,

so they seem to apply to the natural sciences and nothing else. Nonetheless, they have qualities that make people want to extend them to other areas:

1. They've been extremely **successful** in dealing with many important issues. It's hard to argue with success.
2. They have great **intellectual appeal**. They stick as much as they can to what we can all observe, and go beyond that as cautiously as possible. So they seem reliable. Also, measurement, mathematics and similar principles are immensely powerful. They actually tell us quite a lot, as long as we apply them with sufficient discipline, attentiveness and ingenuity. So they call forth high-quality intellectual effort.
3. They're extremely **critical**: they demand proof, they're intolerant of other forms of thought, and they attack from a position of practical strength, because they do some important things very well.

The result is that people try to extend such principles beyond their limits. The modern social sciences try to imitate the natural sciences, if you say anything at all about the world around you people will ask you for studies to back it up, and today there are efforts to merge the study of man with evolutionary biology. That is considered as way of making the study of man more respectable.

1.5 A note on postmodernism etc.

I've said that scientism reigns supreme. You hear sometimes that that's old hat, that the Cartesian outlook has been superseded, and so on.

Don't believe it. Cultural relativism and social constructivism don't answer questions. When decisions have to be made, you have to have some way of doing it, and the effect of such views is to put an even greater premium on colorable claims to disinterested objective expertise, because that's the only thing that can negotiate the differing and equally valid views of various cultures. In fact, such views make it harder to contest claims of scientific expertise since they debunk nonexpert knowledge so totally.

2 Liberalism

How does scientism relate to morality and politics?

Human beings are, among other things, objects in space. It follows that you can apply the methods of the modern natural sciences to them. Since you *can* do that, Occam's Razor says you *should* do that—exclusively. You should try to rely, not just in physiology or physical anthropology but even in political, social and moral affairs, on scientific reasoning alone, or at least to something as close as possible to scientific reasoning. It's irrational to do otherwise.

2.1 General nature

When you take the scientific and technological outlook, and so the present-day understanding of reason, and apply it to political, social and moral issues, you get liberalism.¹

Liberalism is based on a stripped-down view of the world. It says in effect that there aren't any transcendent goods, there's just desire, and there aren't any essences of things that we have to accept and respect, the world is what we make of it. Those are the same basic understandings you find in technological thinking. Liberalism as we now have it is therefore equivalent to a refined form of technocracy. It's replaced other forms of political modernity, like communism, that were less refined and turned out not to work.

2.2 Knee-jerk objections

It's important to understand that liberalism has a definite logic behind it, which is the same as the current understanding of what's

¹I use "liberalism" in the American sense to mean what you find on the editorial page of *The New York Times*, rather than the European sense, where it means more what Americans call "classical liberalism." I also use it in a more general sense to mean the way of thinking about political and social affairs that's now established. In that sense all respectable public figures today are liberals. *The New York Times* has the position it does because it sets the standard. You can't differ from it very much and still be considered respectable or even rational.

rational. That why liberalism is so enormously powerful. It's thought to be equivalent to reason itself.

In traditionalist circles discussions of liberalism are usually dismissive. Liberals are crazy, they're a bunch of yuppies and Oprah fans, they're bad people conspiring against the Church, and so on.

Dismissive theories have some truth in them:

1. Liberalism includes a lot of things that don't make much sense.
2. If you accept the claims of the Church, you're going to have problems with a movement that substitutes the will of man for the will of God, and is opposed to the idea of a created order, and of religious truth and authority. The movement will just seem evil.
3. It's obvious that some people support liberalism for reasons of fashion or class interest. If you're a lawyer, educator, journalist, or bureaucrat you don't want people to follow inherited ideas and practices. You don't want them to be able to function on their own at all. You want a general scheme of social management designed and run by professionals. So those professions are technocratic and therefore, in today's circumstances, liberal. Ditto for the fashion and entertainment industries. They don't want people to have their own outlook, which is likely to be traditional ideas. They want people to have an outlook that is manufactured for them industrially. They too favor technocracy—also self-indulgence—and are therefore liberal.

Dismissive theories obviously aren't the whole truth, though. If liberalism is so dumb, how come it always wins? If it's so illogical, how come everyone knows what it requires? If it's so self-interested, how come people idealize it?

Also, how did liberalism get to be so pervasive? Even people who officially don't believe its basic principles—would-be adherents of traditional religion or whoever—accept them in practice. To the extent they don't, they're excluded from public life. Most of us have liberal friends and relatives. They aren't all evil people. And we're liberal ourselves. If we examine our presumptions and reactions, a lot of them are liberal. Why is that?

2.3 Principles

The strength of liberalism is that discussion and knowledge have a social element. They rely on principles people have a right to assume everyone accepts. Most of us don't find enlightenment sitting around in the desert somewhere. We know what we know with the help of other people.

If you discuss things in accordance with the principles generally accepted today, it's hard to avoid sliding into liberal conclusions. You have to be critical and resist every step of the way, and that's hard to do. Also, you have to appeal to principles not everyone will say he accepts, like "what's good is different from what's desired," or "it's OK to view men and women somewhat differently." That means you'll cut yourself out of the discussion, which will be based on scientific principles, which everyone really does accept, and default principles like equality.

So scientific reasoning gets applied to human relations. It gives us:

1. Technological hedonism: preference, aversion and technical rationality as the sole rational principles of conduct. The reason is quite simple:
 - (a) Preference and aversion are observable.
 - (b) They give you standards that account for a lot of human conduct: people go for what they want and avoid what they don't.
 - (c) Since those are standards that tell you what to do in every possible situation, why add other standards based on things that are less observable and harder to demonstrate, like the good, beautiful, and true or God's will? Occam's Razor says you shouldn't.
2. Equality. Scientism can't make distinctions among values, so it has to treat persons and lifestyles as equal in value. I'm equal to you, and I should get what I want as much as you get what you want. The reason is that

- (a) Preference and aversion are the source of all value. To say something is valuable is simply to say it is preferred.
- (b) Since all desires are equally desires, all goods are equally goods. To say what one man desires is less valuable than what another desires is simply to value the desires of the first man less and so to value him less. That's arbitrary, discriminatory, and oppressive.

Scientism therefore gives us a supreme moral and political ideal: give people what they want, as much and as equally as possible. The point of politics, social life and morality is to turn the world into a sort of machine for giving people whatever they happen to want. What possible objection could there be to that? What part of maximum equal satisfaction are you going to reject?

That ideal is the same as the ideal present-day liberalism gives us. It follows that liberalism can be demonstrated to be correct given the present understanding of reason. Even if people don't think of liberalism as scientific and technological, even if they think of it as soft and warm and fuzzy and nuanced and appreciative of the complexities of life, its close connection to the accepted understanding of reason remains available as a decisive argument and is, I believe, responsible for its seeming inevitability. It means that nonliberal views can never win the argument.

2.4 Specific features

The specific features of the system are determined by its technical requirements.

1. Mixed economy.
 - (a) The ideal political system would be socialism: a centralized administrative apparatus that owns and runs everything. That's why the liberal Left is considered more idealistic and progressive than the liberal Right.
 - (b) Experience has shown that socialism doesn't work, so we have a second best system that combines bureaucracy with markets.

- (c) In theory, bureaucracy is more authoritative. It applies reason to social reality in a clearer and more direct way. In practice it's more complicated and it's often money that calls the shots. It gets the job done.

2. Globalism.

- (a) If the system is universal it can deal with all issues in a comprehensive way without interference from local pressure groups like the American people or the Catholic Church.
- (b) As Madison says in Federalist 10, pressure groups become less influential in a larger setting. If you want a government based on the kind of reason Madison favored, you need an extensive republic. Liberalism therefore favors open borders, world economic union, and international organizations of every kind.

3. The abolition of all institutions and standards at odds with a comprehensive technological system. That's what "culture war" and "life" issues are all about.

- (a) Traditional and local institutions have got to go. They interfere with the rational system for the promotion of equal satisfaction that is the goal of liberal technocracy. Everything has to be transparent and manageable from the point of view of those on top.
- (b) Family, religion, nationality, and non-liberal conceptions of personal integrity and dignity
 - i. are generally opaque and resistant to outside control.
 - ii. aren't based on expert knowledge. That means they're based on ignorance, prejudice, and the desire to dominate.
 - iii. aren't oriented toward maximum equal satisfaction of individual preference. That means they point social life in the wrong direction.

iv. recognize distinctions and authorities that aren't required by liberal market and bureaucratic institutions. It follows that they're based on hate and oppression. The family, for example, is based on distinctions of sex, age, and blood. That's outrageous.

So nonliberal institutions have no right to exist. If you can't get rid of them explicitly then at least you have to turn them into optional private tastes and consumer goods that are not allowed to affect social relations (which is really the same as destroying them). So you've got to be in favor of privatized sex, family, religion, and personal morality. All the slogans you hear—diversity, tolerance, multiculturalism—are means to that end.

2.5 Unquestionable authority

All these conclusions are thought to be a direct and obvious consequence of reason as such. You can't argue against them. If you oppose them

1. You're ignorant, confused, and irrational, since what you're for is against reason and not based on knowledge.
2. You're trying to get what you want at the expense of what other people want. You're greedy.
3. Since you want to stick other people with what you want them to have instead of what they want, you're willful and oppressive. You're a bigot and a hater.

Liberals say they believe in reason. On their understanding of reason, which is the official public understanding, they're right beyond all possibility of discussion. Their opponents are not just wrong but so obviously wrong that there's something wrong not only with their arguments but with the opponents themselves.

In all sincerity liberals say the same things about nonliberals that nonliberals say about them: they're crazy, they're a bunch of odd people from odd backgrounds, they're evil or at least aligned with evil.

Those are the views that implicitly or explicitly are taught in all the schools and presented by all reputable public figures. That's why outside the U.S. you can now be fined heavily or put in jail for saying there are problems with homosexuality or Islam.

That's also why Catholic traditionalists are so suspicious of "dialogue." It's not that it's bad to discuss things with people, Jesus and Paul and Thomas Aquinas did it all the time. It's that the rules of discussion—the accepted understandings of what's reasonable—are stacked against us. They make it conceptually impossible for us to present our points or have them understood.

3 Objections in principle

How do we respond to all this?

First, by pointing out the problems with the present system. It's based on a particular understanding of reason, and a corresponding understanding of politics—of rational public action. There are big problems with both.

3.1 Scientism

First, there are problems saying modern natural science is the whole of knowledge.

3.1.1 Science is dependent

Science is obviously **incomplete** as a system. To work at all it needs things that are not science. You can't tell whether a scientific theory is true or even worth bothering with by running a chemical test on it.

Modern natural science requires things like **common sense** and **judgment**. It depends on the reliability of personal evaluations of people, evidence and situations. In particular, it requires

1. The assumption of a world in which science makes sense. As the Pope said at Regensburg:

Modern scientific reason quite simply has to accept the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature as a given, on which its methodology has to be based. Yet the question why this has to be so is a real question.

2. The assumption that our senses and memory are in general reliable—that we're not in the hands of an evil deceiver or living in the *Matrix*.
3. The assumption that we can distinguish science and scientists from their bogus versions, which is a matter of judgment, and that we can understand the point of what scientists are saying, when they should be taken seriously, and how their results should be interpreted and applied.

So science requires social and personal awareness—the ability to recognize and classify social networks and degrees of authority and personal reliability, and to understand the setting in which someone is speaking and his purpose in speaking.

4. The assumption that the scientific community will be able and inclined to sort through all the possibilities and pick out the most likely ones—that is, the best supported theories—at least on the whole, in the long run, and to an extent that makes scientific consensus reliable as a general rule. Science requires faith in a particular community: the scientific community.

These assumptions seem reasonable, at least as a general rule. The point though is not that they are false or unreasonable but that they are necessary to science but not part of science and not scientifically demonstrable. The claim science is the whole of our knowledge must therefore be false. Our general understanding of the nature of the world, our knowledge of other people and our faith in them—our common sense—comes first.

Science is a specialized tool that depends on common sense. Common sense is not science. Therefore, science is a subordinate although important part of our knowledge of the world.

3.1.2 Science is limited in scope

Modern natural science achieves its power by **limiting** what it can deal with. It can't deal with the whole of life. In particular, science doesn't deal well with:

1. Things that can't be measured, like the good and beautiful.
2. Things that aren't observed by trained observers. If a tree falls in the forest, and a trained observer didn't observe it, did it really fall? **Rogue waves** provide an example. For years, oceanographers denied their existence in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.
3. Things that can't be observed repeatedly, for example specific events in the past. They're not repeatable, and they usually weren't observed by anyone with scientific training, so the scientific outlook has trouble with them. Also, if something's really out of the ordinary, science tosses it aside as an anomalous data point. That's why history that claims to be scientific says miracles never happen. It's not that it proves they never happen, it's that if one happened scientific history couldn't know about it.
4. Things, like my own subjective experience, that can't be observed at all by randomly chosen observers. Modern natural science has a big problem with consciousness, so scientists often ignore it or deny its existence or redefine it as something else. Why would that make sense to anyone who isn't fanatically committed to the view that science is the whole of knowledge, and the things of which it speaks are the only things that are real?
5. Things existing scientific theories don't know what to do with, which are generally just ignored. An example is the shape of the Atlantic Ocean before continental drift theories became acceptable. If science is the whole of knowledge and reality, then the things scientists don't know what to do with can't exist. The extreme specialization that's necessary in modern

natural science makes holes in the scientific picture of things inevitable.

The basic point, once again, is that science can only be a part of our knowledge. It can't be the whole.

3.2 Problems with liberalism

The basic problem with liberalism is that it doesn't make sense to apply reasoning like that of the modern natural sciences to most aspect of human relations. You won't understand human life if you try to rationalize it too much and leave out qualities and distinctions that can't be measured.

So it's not surprising that liberalism doesn't make as much sense as advertised. It's basically self-contradictory. It makes freedom the ultimate social and moral goal, but freedom can't possibly be the ultimate social and moral goal:

1. Social and moral order are concerned with limitations on the will and therefore limitations on freedom.
2. Wills conflict, so government and morality have to decide which goals get the preference. That means that the ultimate standard isn't freedom or equality, it's the accepted conception of what's good. Liberal thinkers claim their approach stands outside arguments about the nature of the good and so lets 100 flowers bloom freely. That's obviously false. The good is what makes actions rational—a rational action is one oriented toward some good—so nobody stands outside arguments about what it is. If government claims to be based on freedom and equality rather than some definite conception of the good then either something doesn't make sense or something is being hidden.

3.2.1 Nihil nimis

Freedom and equality are not bad things. A good social order would have plenty of each. Liberalism would be a good thing if it were

nothing more than opposition to arbitrary power combined with reasonable support for freedom, equality, discussion, reason and law. Nor is there anything specially bad about liberal institutions like division of powers and limited and representative government.

The problem is not that liberalism favors freedom and equality or republican government but that it puts them first and so stretches them beyond their limits and causes them to become overreaching and tyrannical.

Limitless freedom destroys itself. Equal freedom is simple, abstract, universally applicable, and infinitely demanding, and there's no way it can limit itself. If it's the ultimate standard it demands the transformation of all human relations. That means it will destroy a free society, since a free society is, among other things, one in which government doesn't try to transform everything.

3.2.2 *Natura abhorret a vacuo*

The problem with taking the principles of freedom and equality as the basis of social life is that they don't have enough substantive content. Free to do what? Equal in what respect? Abstract principles can't answer that kind of question, so liberalism ends up with no goal but itself. Instead of freedom we get the cause of freedom as the supreme social goal. Freedom becomes freedom to be liberal.

That doesn't make sense. Freedom makes sense when it is freedom to pursue some good. You can try to say that liberal freedom is freedom to do what you want but in the end that's not enough because desires conflict. So liberalism ends up making itself a self-sufficient absolute and eats itself up.

As liberalism advances freedom, equality, discussion, reason, law and so on take on very odd meanings. For example: if everything and everybody has to be equally free then there will be conflicts because people get in each other's way. My freedom to chat with friends will conflict with your freedom to enjoy perfect quiet. Everything anybody does that affects other people will start looking like an imposition. As a result:

1. All human conduct and relationships will have to be supervised and controlled for the sake of freedom. Otherwise we'll

oppress each other.

2. Human goals must be limited to those that are neutral and nonoppressive and don't affect other people: careers, consumer goods, and private indulgences. Freedom becomes "have it your way" as in Burger King—the ability to choose completely arbitrarily among preset goods the system finds equally easy to provide so that other people's choices aren't affected. We're also allowed to support the overall system. So we're allowed to be liberal activists.
3. Free speech comes to mean that nobody can say anything that makes anyone else less able to say something. If I say "Islam's got some major problems" then that reduces the ability of Muslims to take part equally in public discussion. So the only speech allowable is speech that deals with specific practical issues and speech that supports liberalism. Any other speech violates free speech, because it implicitly suppresses something someone else might want to say.
4. As we've noted, all social arrangements that can't be supervised, controlled, and made irrelevant to everyone but the isolated individual, like traditional religion, the family, and all close-knit community, have got to go. Otherwise you have centers of social power that will inevitably violate freedom and equality. That's social injustice.

The effect is that equal freedom, taken as an ultimate goal, functions as a particularly demanding, intolerant, oppressive, and inhuman religion. People believe in it as the highest principle, and view anything else as irrational, oppressive and violent. If you're "extremist" or "divisive"—liberals say that instead of "heretical" and "schismatic" but it means the same thing—you have to be destroyed before you plunge the whole world into hell. Liberalism supposedly started out to put an end to religious oppression and violence but instead it sets up a new sort of theocracy.

4 A new beginning

What do we do about all this?

4.1 Critique of technological reason

Obviously, we need a different and broader conception of reason.

Plato said that that philosophy begins in wonder. That's no longer true. The method of doubt and the practical orientation of present-day thought leave no room for it. What we need most of all is to change that, and to recognize how much larger the world is than the world presented to us by modern secular empirical reason.

It's not Catholics but modern secularists who impose an irrational and oppressive dogmatism that crushes life and makes a life in accordance with reason impossible. That's not just my idea, by the way. In his Regensburg address, the Pope said,

The intention ... is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism [of the achievements of modern thought], but of broadening our concept of reason and its application.... We [must] overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically verifiable, and ... once more disclose its vast horizons.

4.2 Tradition and revelation

All that sounds very grand. What does it mean concretely?

One thing it means concretely is a bigger role for tradition and therefore more knowledge of tradition, the sort of thing the Roman Forum promotes.

Tradition is necessary for reason. Correctly identifying things and what they mean is necessary before reasoning can even begin. We can't reason if we don't know what things are and what connects and differentiates them. The methods of modern natural science can't tell us about anything but motions in space, and the good, beautiful, and true aren't motions in space. So the methods of the modern natural sciences by themselves don't let us reason

about the things that concern us most basically. If we limit ourselves to them we will deal with those things irrationally.

The things that concern us most basically are subtle, complex, and overarching, so we can't simply observe them and note down their characteristics. The most important way we find out about them is through experience—dealing with whatever life throws up and seeing what works, what doesn't, and what comes into focus.²

Since the world is so very complicated and subtle, and none of us knows everything, we also need social experience, or tradition. Reason must be traditionalist. Otherwise it loses its connection to human reality—it loses its ability to say what the things we care about are and what they mean—and goes mad.

Tradition by itself has its own problems. It can be wrong, but I don't think that's the real problem, since you can always assume that if experience misleads you then more experience is the best thing to set you straight. The more basic problem is that by itself it can't sustain itself and maintain its coherence and its ability to help us interpret life. The reason is that tradition in and of itself—the simple accumulation of experience and what various people have said and done—can't resolve all the issues experience throws up. Look at where modern thought and mainstream Protestantism, which rely solely on the accumulation of experience, discussion, and the decisions of particular men, have ended up.

Tradition therefore needs something additional, a principle of authority that transcends tradition. It must, in the long run, accept revelation and something that functions very much like papal infallibility. Without those things we can no longer have faith in tradition, since it won't be able to resolve the basic issues life will predictably throw up. We know in advance that it's going to fall apart, so we can't rationally believe in it. Without a coherent tradition worthy of rational belief, though, reason itself falls apart. Without something like a pope no such tradition can exist in the long run. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is therefore, among other things, a statement of the necessity of an authoritative Church based on revelation to a life of reason.

²Consider Newman's "illative sense" and Pascal's "intuitive mind."

4.3 Walking the walk

Philosophical arguments and general principles are necessary, but they won't save any of us, and they won't be effective with many people unless you can show them something concrete that works. So in addition to the intellectual battle, which is necessary for spiritual freedom, we must take advantage of our freedom and reason to build a better way of life. That's an entirely practical matter that we can all contribute to in one way or another, if only by trying to live well and going to confession and trying again when we fall short.

One important point to mention is the need for beauty. Beauty gives us an immediate perception of the presence of the transcendent in the world around us. When Catholics lack that perception I think their Catholicism sometimes becomes more like team spirit or attachment to a set of rules than an absorbing way of life that discloses to them the way the world really is and what life is really about.

These points are a matter for another conference or series of conferences, and there are a lot of people here who know more about them than I do. So I will go on.

4.4 Practical politics

The rebirth of reason requires practical activity in public life as well as private. We are social beings. Our surroundings affect us, and sometimes they just don't leave us alone. Little Greek boys used to grow up knowing Homer. I grew up knowing cigarette jingles, because that's what was around me. It gets worse. Liberalism has its own logic that it's inclined to pursue without limit, it is indeed rational in its own way, and there have been serious proposals that teaching your children Christianity should be treated as child abuse. Such things can happen.

Contemplation and private life are not enough. A different direction in thought and our efforts to make our own lives better have to be followed up by practical efforts to change the orientation of politics and social life generally. Those efforts should include

1. Self-defense. The right of families and religious and community institutions to run their own affairs. The defense of homeschooling would be one example.
2. A defense of whatever traditional order is still present in social life. That would include life issues and the defense of marriage.
3. Most importantly, an attempt to change the principles on which public life is carried on.

How do we do those things? That's a practical question, and there are a lot of possible strategies. It's another topic for several more conferences. We're trying to change principles, which means we have to challenge the ones that are established, so bold statement is probably the most useful contribution we can make. You have to wake people up and keep your own mind clear.

There's also a use though for putting things in a more reformist and moderate-sounding way. Alliances can be useful. Catholic homeschoolers need the help of Baptist and secular homeschoolers. Obviously you have to be careful. Modern ways of thinking spread like viruses. They have a genius for invading, colonizing, and transforming other ways of thinking. That's been a lot of the recent history of Catholicism.

On the other hand, liberals have been able to sound moderate while steadily advancing their cause. Why not traditionalists? It's a point we need to think about. If you want to transform the world, it helps to be a friend to the world who wishes it well. One possible pitch, for example, would be to say that the American way has many good things in it, but to retain what's good in it its liberal aspects have to become more limited and less self-destructive. Liberalism has to become an attribute of a social order based on something more basic rather than something self-contained and ultimate.

So maybe in some settings our slogan ought to be "Traditional Catholicism is 21st century Americanism." Can we make that slogan good? I think we could praise the "American way" in all sincerity. The American way is not necessarily what Americanist rhetoric says it is. It's just the way Americans have actually lived together,

and we couldn't have existed at all as a people if there hadn't been some good things about our common life. If evil is a deficiency, then what is most real in that way of life must be things that are consistent with what is good and true. In principle we ought to be able to appeal to that. The current understanding of reason is not bad because of what it has—observation, mathematics, measurement—but what it lacks. The same should be true of American life. Our purpose should be to help both by adding what's missing.

5 Outlook

The problems that have led us to our present situation are as basic as the definition of what's rational, what's real, and what's good, and they pervade all society, so the response has to be equally basic and comprehensive. That's what we are here for. It's a struggle, but that's what life is about.

A major problem is that liberalism is very good at destroying possible centers of resistance. It has radically undercut the function of local institutions and networks of mutual assistance through the development of the social services state. It has conquered and thoroughly colonized education and the rearing of children, which become every more professionalized and public. Its conception of human rights and nondiscrimination establishes a pervasive regulatory network which makes it all but impossible for institutions of any size to be anything but liberal.

So things look bad. That means, however, that there's lots of room on the upside. The victory of the other side makes them stupid, especially since their views leave out so much reality. You can see that in things like PC and "zero tolerance." No matter how stupid people think they are, they can't get rid of them. That's a sign visible to everyone that something is wrong.

Victory also makes the other side increasingly corrupt. Individual self-interest as ultimate reality is no basis for the sacrifices even ordinary honesty requires. For illustrations, look closely at news stories from Brussels.

Our advantage is that the truth will out. Liberalism seems all-powerful, but it leaves out too much so it can't last forever. Life

must go on, liberalism applies ever more thoroughly to everything, and it's hard to live happily or reasonably as a liberal. There are too many things the outlook can't deal with. The future belongs to people with children, for example, and liberalism doesn't fit well with family life. Liberals don't have children.

If established views don't clear the way for a good way of life, people will look for something else. To put the issue in marketing terms, there's a big gap in the intellectual products now available. What's on offer is flashy and claims to solve all problems, but it doesn't really work.

Even today, in the world of Obama, McCain, Hillary and MTV, we can work to clarify the situation, so that more people see what's at stake, and help fill the gap in what's on offer. We can show the way to something better. Many of those here are doing just that.

We can't expect fast results, but we have good reason to be confident in the ultimate outcome. Basic issues can't be suppressed forever, and they can reassert themselves very quickly when the wind changes. And as Catholics we have ultimate assurance that the gates of Hell will not prevail.

Liberal society has fundamental problems, it's not going to last forever, and the question is how we should live now, and what there will be to pick up the pieces left by its ultimate disintegration. The more the issues have been thought through, and the better the available alternatives, the better things will go for ourselves and our country. The fall of communism in Russia has meant mafia rule and collapse of life expectancies. I hope things don't go so badly in America, and that we can do better when liberalism falls apart. Our task, as citizens as well as Catholics, is to prepare for that day.