

1 Introduction

This paper explores the incarnation of nihilism in Horkheimer's and in Camus' works. It explores Horkheimer's presentation of his belief in the physical world's lack of objective reason and its manifestations in modern society. It will identify Horkheimer's opinion on the adverse effect that the elimination of objective reason from thought has had on society. It will explore his views on the industrialization of thought and its devaluation of human life in general. Then the elimination of objective reason's role in thought will be linked to a similar view in Camus' philosophy. We will briefly review how it leads to Camus' concept of absurdity. The ultimate goal of this paper is to compare Horkheimer's views and Camus' views on how this lack of objective reason manifests itself in the individual and in society. It will summarize Horkheimer's discussion of its negative impacts and Camus' belief in its positive impacts.

2 Horkheimer's Concept of Reason

The patron saint of rationality is Plato: he granted it the same ontological status, more or less, that he granted the paper upon which he expressed his views. It permitted the legitimate assignment of conceptual hierarchy. With the ontological integrity that Plato assigned to reason scholars felt comfortable in defining moral and social standards, racial hierarchies, in fact all sorts of conceptual echelons. Society was able to maintain the belief that some actions were morally good, some occupations were more worthwhile than others, and some intentions were better than others.

Recently, however, such belief in objective reason has been subjected to a rigorous pummeling by philosophers and their cohorts in science. For modern philosophers it is becoming harder and harder to maintain this belief; in fact a sizeable proportion of modern philosophy is devoted to the treatment of a nihilist view of objective reason. In Horkheimer's opinion the realization in society, in general, of this absence has led to the rapid industrialization and mechanization of thought itself; in his opinion it has had severe repercussions in our political and moral systems, our art, our religion, our economy,...

And all of this has been goaded by the survival of subjective reason. The pragmatization of thought has only contributed to the devaluation of

human life. In Horkheimer's opinion we are experiencing a cultural crisis as a result of the decline in belief of objective reason reciprocated by the rise of subjective reason.

2.1 Subjective Reason

Subjective reason is characterized by Horkheimer, and similarly by the general population, as an individual's ability to perform particular mental functions. We say that an individual is a reasonable when he or she makes use of his or her ability to classify, infer, and deduce. This capacity is given the name "subjective reason" by Horkheimer. It is a pragmatic capacity: the capacity to assess means for an end. But it affords little advantage for the assessment of ends themselves. Subjective reason is concerned only with means for ends; it cannot establish what is an appropriate end, or judge an end itself in any way. "it attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable"¹

2.2 Objective Reason

On the other hand a belief in objective reason permits the assessment of ends themselves. Objective reason, purportedly, assigns to each concept an address in a hierarchy of similar thoughts. With a belief in objective reason claims about absolute goodness or importance were thought to be legitimate. Concepts occupy their own pigeon hole in a categorical ladder of concepts in the doctrine of objective reason; individuals could consult this hierarchy to select an end, then make use of their subjective reality to determine the best method for achieving that end. Objective reason, then, incorporated this hierarchy and permitted the employment of subjective reason. It was a belief in "reason as a force not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world - in relations among human beings and among social classes, in social institutions, and in nature and its manifestations".

According to Horkheimer objective reason was to be supra-functional: "when the idea of reason was conceived, it was intended to achieve more than a mere regulation of the relation between means and ends: it was regarded as the instrument for understanding the ends, *for determining them*"².

¹The Eclipse of Reason, p 3

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2.3 The Loss of Objective Reason

Gradually concepts have lost their categorical integrity after philosophical investigation, however. Take, for example, the concept *good* and value words considered in Hare's analysis. When we seek the characteristic(s) that make various objects or concepts *good* we find no common ground among them. He says, "Nearly all so-called 'naturalistic definitions' will break down... for to be genuinely naturalistic a definition must contain no expression for whose applicability there is not a definite criterion which does not involve the making of value-judgement". In essence, we find that definition of value-judgements are fundamentally tautological or inconsistent. We cannot adequately identify what it means for something to be good.

This sort of nihilism is widespread nowadays and finds many incarnations. Nietzsche tried to convince us that our preference of truth over, say, the life preserving is non-rational and perhaps arbitrary. The severe social reverence of certain popular teen-boy music bands with the simultaneous disregard of other music as quality art emphasizes objective meaninglessness of the general view of music, and perhaps art in general.

The objectivity that had been fashionable at one time is almost entirely absent now as a consequence of the discovery of a fundamental self-contradiction or meaninglessness within various concepts. Such realizations precluded the belief in their categorical status. Horkheimer says, "The present crisis of reason consists fundamentally in the fact that at a certain point thinking either became incapable of conceiving such objectivity at all or began to negate it as a delusion"³

Among the positive effects of subjective reason is its agency in dissolving superstition. But it has relegated objective reason to the same status: "We might say that the history of reason or enlightenment from its beginnings in Greece down to the present has led to a state of affairs in which even the word reason is suspected of connoting some mythological entity."⁴

2.4 Consequences

Upon relieving objective reason of any integrity subjective reason is the only abstract guiding principle operating in society. But its role as a tool for achieving ends rather than establishing them has left a largely pragmatic

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society. It has thus equated the valuable with the useful and productive. According to Horkheimer this has been the devaluation of thinking: thinking, now, is only valuable as a means to an end. He claims that this amounts to the industrialization of thought and activity. He says, "Concepts have become 'streamlined', rationalized, labour-saving devices"⁵

One serious problem with this loss of objective reason is the vacuum that remains where important standards for judgement once were. With objective standards an individual's lifestyle could be evaluated; there was a distinct place and even a format for morality. The concepts of *good* and *evil* were endorsed by society, though various opinions of the meaning of each may have been maintained. With the belief in objective standards society could pass judgement on behaviour. Now that it seems that no standards can be legitimately maintained, only pragmatic standards of judgement remain: "reason has been so thoroughly purged of any specific trend or preference that it has finally renounced even the task of passing judgement on man's actions and way of life... justice, equality, happiness, tolerance, all the concepts that, as mentioned, were in preceding centuries supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason, have lost their intellectual roots."

And subjective reason cannot fill in where objective reason once was. It is ignorant of the value of the aims it serves to fulfill. All of our values and vices are neutral. Morality is degraded into means for ends, so that actions are evaluated by a party according to the actions' agreement with the party's intentions. Good actions are those, then, that are beneficial for the party. Subjective morality for Horkheimer is no morality: "Subjective reason conforms to anything"⁶

In Horkheimer's opinion, this loss of objective reason is so foul that it has led to the uniform devaluation of human life, action, and interaction. We can no longer claim that freedom is better than oppression; one social or economic system cannot be compared to another according to its principles. He says, "it is also impossible to say that one economic or political system, no matter how cruel and despotic, is less reasonable than another."

Philosophy loses its stature in a pragmatic society: ontological and perhaps epistemological issues are disregarded. The study of ethics becomes a study of telology. In a pragmatic society the search for truth is subordinate to practical applicability; it is valuable only when it leads to something

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different from truth. And the same goes for the natural sciences - they are valuable only as precursors engineering applications. Any search for truth is meaningless in a pragmatic society. What can "truth itself" mean? Pragmatism admits no such concept.

Art, too, is devalued. Rationalization in society has neutralized art - it has no meaning itself; "Art has been severed from truth as well as politics or religion"⁷. In Horkheimer's opinion art can only derive value from objective meaning; to appreciate art, he claims, is to appreciate its objective meaning. A pragmatic society can not appreciate art as art; it must be a means to an end in such a society. He says, "no living relation to the work in question, no direct, spontaneous understanding of its function as an expression, no experience of its totality as an image of what once called truth, is left."⁸. Artistic pursuit has little value in a pragmatic society - it is not a means to another end, it is not productive in the industrial sense.

For Horkheimer, though, some objective standards remain intact. An individual's ability to perceive beauty implies a regard for objective value: "Man's esthetic responsiveness relates in its prehistory to various forms of idolatry; his belief in the goodness or sacredness of a thing precedes his enjoyment of its beauty. This applies no less to such concepts as freedom and humanity"⁹ though "he may never fully realize the meaninglessness of the things he adores".

Horkheimer realizes that the revival of objective reason to fill in the voids its dissolution created would be a self-defeating activity. He says, "The conservatism of modern philosophical revivals with respect to cultural elements is a self delusion". To breath life into objective reason for any means whatsoever would be the relegation of objectivity to the subjective. It would be pragmatic objectivity, and thus not objectivity at all. He thinks the current and popular attempts to do just this - by the neo-Thomists, for example - are misguided. Not only do they require an absurd distortion of the original views but only perpetuate the subjectivisation movement: "neo-Thomists cannot help furthering the pragmatization of life and the formalization of thought"¹⁰. They do not recognize the incompatibility of their aims. In such an attempt, he says, "the absolute itself becomes a means, objective reason a scheme for subjective purposes".

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¹⁰p 62

Horkheimer's view of the collapse of objective reason lends support to Camus' discussion. Essential to Camus' view is the belief that the world itself lacks meaning and reason; the lack of objective content and standard of judgement - the lack of meaning - leads to a tension within anybody who sees this absence. Each human, Camus believes, desires to discover meaning in some sense, whether it is moral significance, occupational significance, emotional significance,... But the very absence in the physical world of such examples despite one's search is a source of tension.

Nevertheless humans continue to search for meaning. The search, then, is pedantic and absurd. Not only this, some humans realize that the world lacks objective reason and live their lives with this realization. These people are "absurd heroes" according to Camus. Essential to both Horkheimer's view and to Camus' view is the lack of objective reason in the physical world, but they differ in their views of how this absence affects individuals and society.

When we realize that the world is essentially irrational a tension develops in each of us. On one hand we desire meaning, at least to discover meaning in the world. On the other, we have realized that we cannot find it because it is absent in naked reality. This tension places an individual in an awkward position, for that person is unwilling to give up his or her desire for meaning, while on the other hand, he or she is unwilling to deceive himself or herself into thinking that he or she will find it. When each of us looks for objective moral standards, for example, we will never find them. Or when we try to establish a course of action in life we will find no help from the objective world. We will not find that one occupation is more noble than another.

But in Camus' opinion this irrationality can offer an advantage to those who see it. In his opinion it can *provide* salvation from a mechanical life: "But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement". The realization of our absurd position is a beginning; it prompts us to be conscious of our goals. In fact it can redirect our goals, "Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows".

Recall that in Horkheimer's presentation the irrationality of the world often relieves the value of pursuits; in Camus' presentation the realization that there are no objective standards enables one to assess his or her actions according to his or her own desires. That is, in Camus' opinion this realization provides motivation for assessment of ends according to one's desires, beliefs, and so on. Nevertheless, such ends are subjective and fall prey to

Horkheimer's concerns.

We might distinguish Horkheimer's views, at least in part, from Camus' in the following way: Horkheimer presents the lack of objective reason as a disadvantage for society, while Camus presents it as an advantage for the individual. Society could degrade into an amoral pragmatism while each individual is justified in pursuing his or her own goals with little concern.

2.5 The Creative and The Absurd

But for Camus irrationality offers other advantages. Not only does the realization of this irrationality encourage consciousness of one's own goals and actions according to them, the lack of objective standards provides opportunity. For certainly, absence is an opportunity for creativity. It seems that in Camus' opinion irrationality permits the creative enterprise. The lack of meaning permits interpretation; it allows us *assign* meaning. This ability to assign meaning to the physical world is the essence of creativity. The absurd hero is one who makes use of irrationality who acts despite and, indeed, in spite of irrationality. The absurd is the seed of genius: "All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning".

Perhaps nobility is the ability to act in the absence of advantage. Perhaps it is the ability to make something from nothing: "The absurd world more than others derives its nobility from that abject birth". It seems that the creative and the noble may be intimately related and necessitate an absurd position in one way or another. The absurd - the realization of irrationality - in Camus' opinion, is an opportunity.

2.6 Absurdity and Philosophy

It is an opportunity for creative expression, but more equally important, it leads to the core issue of philosophy. This realization prompts an individual to ask fundamental questions about life: "At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery. Here, I must conclude that it is good. For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it... there can be no question of masking the evidence, of suppressing the absurd by denying one of its terms of its equation. It is essential to know whether one can live with it or whether, on the other hand, logic commands one to die of it". For Camus philosophy derives its value from the lack of objective reason. The irrationality of the world *enables*

philosophical contemplation; irrationality is the mold for the most essential question on philosophy: to live or to die?

The realization of the irrationality of the physical world is opportunity for faith. It is the opportunity for religious belief: Is there meaning outside the meaningless world? Camus says, "There are many ways of leaping, the essential being to leap". This is the essence of faith. The observance of irrationality is opportunity for hope beyond the physical world. It is the opportunity afforded by religion to maintain faith; it is the opportunity for science to discover a sort of non-bipartisan order.

Morality is often counterfactual assertion whereas science is the contemplation of the non-counterfactualness of the universe. Morality describes how the world *should be* whereas science is the contemplation of how it actually *is*. Morality aims to establish order in human relations whereas science tries to identify it order in a broad sense. But both are concerned with universality. Camus' interest is in exploring how religion, science and morality function in an irrational world: "our aim is to shed light upon the steps taken by the mind when, starting from a philosophy of the world's lack of meaning, it ends up by finding a meaning and a depth in it. The most touching of these steps is religious in essence; it becomes obvious in the theme of the irrational. But the most paradoxical and most significant is certainly the one that attributes rational reasons to a world it originally imagined as devoid of any guiding principle."

Philosophy is the host of some absurd heroes. The phenomenologists are one group: they are not concerned with meaning or lack of meaning. Rather, they simply examine perceptions without judgement; they make use of their consciousness in a pure act of observation "phenomenology declines to explain the world, it wants merely a description of actual experience. It confirms absurd thought in its initial assertions that there is no truth"

In Camus' opinion philosophy operates despite the irrationality of the world. In fact, the lack of objective reason is an opportunity for each of us on many fronts. Creativity requires action, in one way or another, that is an extension beyond what we observe. In some cases creativity is interpretation or assignment of meaning to objects or actions. The very fact that we do not observe meaning in the world encourages creative action. Moreover, in Camus' opinion, irrationality is an opportunity for faith. It is consistent with religion, as religion necessitates a leap beyond evidence. The realization of the irrationality of the world has been an opportunity for the individual to engage in intellectual activity, as Camus identifies.

It has had adverse effects on society though, according to Horkheimer. The most serious effect has been the subjectivization of thought - without objective reason, we are only concerned with our own motives and our own happiness. In some sense the advantages discussed by Camus only emphasize Horkheimer's point: while certain actions are good for the individual, they are not necessarily good for society. This irrationality encourages action according to individuals' desires but not necessarily for the benefit of humanity in general.

But in Horkheimer's opinion the lack of objective reason has devalued human thought. In essence, he believes that it has had adverse effects on individual thought. It has posed a threat to the value of philosophy and morality, and has contributed to the devaluation of art. Such effects are seen on both the individual and social scale. Camus is much more willing to explicate the advantages that are associated with a lack of objective reason; such advantages are most easily visible on the individual level. Horkheimer pays much more attention to its social repercussions.