Reason and Natural Law: Choosing the Beggar Over the Monster

By
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Introduction

The Enlightenment stemmed out of a vast array of political and social changes in Europe. It was a period of radical reformation, of privilege and secular authority. Law and morality were believed to have been bred into the blood of kings and queens, leaving the poor void of moral character. Those of lower status were confined to the lower ranks of society—forever abiding by the traditions and rules of those who held power.[1] Intellectuals of the Enlightenment used provocation to address presumed roles of individuals in a static society and the presupposed omnipotence of traditions by turning a critical lens towards many areas of European life using science and philosophy. They perceived that every person had the ability to use Reason—the ability to think for one's self and to formulate their own understanding of the world around them.[2] People began to embody their beliefs by writing and distributing new ideas through print sources such as books, newspaper, pamphlets, periodicals, journals, novels and much more, which engaged the public in progressive discussions.[3] It is important to look at some of these discussions and the people who set them forth to grasp the sorts of deliberations taking place.

One Enlightenment thinker and writer was Immanuel Kant. Kant defined what he thought Enlightenment was, and stated, "Enlightenment is the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity."[4] Kant goes on to explain that one cannot become mature unless one uses Reason, *thinking for one's self*, or as Kant puts it—using one's, "…own intellectual toil."[5] As an endeavor towards enlightenment, natural philosophy was born during this time to bridge science and philosophy, which allowed for new possibilities of discovery and knowledge.

Aside from Kant, the Enlightenment inspired a variety of individuals within and after its time. Other thinkers and writers used their own Reason to develop new ideas, and to even challenge Reason in and of itself. Margaret Cavendish and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley are two of these thinkers inspired by the Enlightenment. The two women believed in using reason, but they also believed that reason had to serve a purpose. Reason was not to be used just for the intention of improving scientific inquiry, but Reason must also be used to serve humanity. Cavendish and Shelley were skeptical of scientific progress. They were concerned that it would not be made useful to the advancement of society, but only to the advancement of the upper class and men's egos. To them, if reason did not contribute to the progression of humankind, which included all classes, then reason was futile and could do more harm than good. I argue that Cavendish and Shelley's texts are not anti-reason, but quite the contrary. To uncover their interest and hope in science and humanity, I will use the points they make to show they are for Reason, and that their ideas recurs back to Kant's public and private use of reason. To make Reason public, or accessible to everyone,

[1] Ronald S. Love, *The Enlightenment* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), 10.

[2] Love, *The Enlightenment*, 16.

[3] Love, *The Enlightenment*, 17.

[4] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," in *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 17.

[5] Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," 18.

Cavendish and Shelly emphasize the natural over the artificial, to have a regular and sensitive perception, and to recognize that there are limits to science.

Understanding of Reason

What I find particularly interesting and worthy of discussion, prior to and in relation to, the general welfare of the human population, was Kant's views on private and public use of one's reason. Kant conferred that there are limitations to freedom that is ubiquitous and asks, what kinds of limitations can hinder or promote enlightenment? Kant responds to this question saying,

> I answer: the *public* use of one's reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring about enlightenment among humans; the private use of one's reason may often, however, be highly restricted without thereby especially impeding the progress of enlightenment.[6]

This brings us back to the gist that Reason must be used to serve humanity. When conferring about the limitations of enlightenment, it is essential to ask, "Who gets to use reason and how? Who even gets to say *what* reason is?" Kant's ideas on the public and private use of reason forces us to answer these questions utilizing our own Reason. If *only* the *public* use of reason can create enlightenment, then it *must* be free, at all times. This means that there are no exceptions to this rule. Reason then, cannot be used for the benefit of only the upper class and of men's egos. This would be a private use of reason and not a public one. Therefore, the enlightenment cannot be brought forth in this way. In direct correspondence to Cavendish and Shelley, reason is something everyone can partake in and that everyone should reap the benefits of. To survey the breadth of this philosophical idea, there are a few points worth noting which are brought up by Cavendish and Shelley, and which make up the bulk of my argument.

Reason as a Natural Phenomena

Cavendish and Shelley are not against scientific progress, but they remain skeptical of its usefulness to the general population because they saw a clear boundary between the natural and unnatural, or—the artificial. Natural phenomena, from their perspective, cannot be emulated or replaced. Anything attempting to do this would fail to give an accurate description of reality. It would be artificial, such as images produced by a microscope. In Cavendish's essay, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," she uses reason to challenge Robert Hook's invention of the microscope. She states,

> Although I am not able to give a solid judgment of the art of micrography and the several dioptical instruments belonging thereto, by reason I have neither studied nor practiced that art, yet of this I am confident: that this same art, with all its instruments, is not able to discover the interior natural motions of any part or creature of nature.[7]

Reason is important here because it can be inferred that she is claiming reason can be used by anyone, not just scientists. It states that she has no experience in handling microscopic technology, but then goes on to argue that it is by use of reason, that she can still make a solid argument against

[6] Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?," 19.

[7] Margaret Cavendish, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," in *Longman Anthology of British Literature*, ed. David Damrosch (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006), 2203.

the usefulness of this innovation. In this way, I argue that reason is multidimensional, meaning that it consists of multiple ways of knowing. This is why even the most inexperienced person (such as herself with microscopic technology) can still use Reason to contribute to new ideas.

Reason is a natural phenomenon that everyone experiences. Reason's multidimensionality stems from the observable world that also includes the thoughts and emotions we feel that are led by our five senses. Therefore, reason is not special or privileged. Cavendish is critical of microscopes because they alter the natural world, and once the natural word is altered, then it is being redefined artificially and excludes certain people or things. She uses the example of the beggar. She states, "And if a painter, should draw a louse as big as a crab, and of that shape as the microscope presents, can anybody imagine that a beggar would believe it to be true?"[8] Cavendish is not only challenging Hook, she is challenging the reader to think seriously about this question. By inference, she claims that it would be difficult for anyone to believe that a beggar would say the drawing is a louse because a beggar knows what a louse looks like. A beggar lives with louse. A beggar has louse all over their body. A beggar, by his/her *Reason*, would know what a louse looks like. She continues, "But if he did, what advantage would it be to the beggar? For it doth neither instruct him how to avoid breeding them, or how to catch them, or to hinder them from biting."[9] Hence, the artificial image of the louse created from the scientific advancement of the microscope does not serve the general population, which includes the most marginalized people of society, such as beggars.

In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor has decided to, "…give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man."[10] Upon closer reading of this, it can be observed that the creature he is creating is artificial. It is not created in the way a natural human being would be created, that is, being conceived by a mother and a father. Not only is the creature itself synthetic, but so is the means of creation and its interconnection to life and death. Victor gives an ominous premonition to his project when he states, "Whence, I often ask myself, did the principle of life proceed?"[11] He is highlighting the mystery of the creation of life, which is a natural phenomenon, but he is also venturing to expose life's other mystery—death. He acknowledges death as a natural occurrence, when he says, "I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body."[12] So, before he has even set forth his task, it can be seen that he is certainly familiar with the boundaries between the natural and the artificial.

Although, Victor makes it clear that he is not trying to recreate man, but create something similar, he still uses *human* remains to build this alternative figure. This fundamental quality of using human body parts essentially makes the creature an artificial human, despite Victor's original intention to create something different. It looks human, but has a grotesque, transparent appearance.[13] Cavendish would call Victor's creature a hermaphrodite and a work of art, rather than a serious scientific use of Reason because his design does not benefit humanity. She says, "For art is not only gross in comparison to nature, but for the most part deformed and defective, and at best produces mixed or hermaphroditical figures…"[14] In fact, since the creature does not look like a human, it is not even considered a member of humanity and is excluded from society.

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[8] Cavendish, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 2205.

[9] Cavendish, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 2205.

[10] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and J. Paul Hunter, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text, Contexts, and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012), 33.

[11] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 31.

[12] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 31

[13] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 35.

[14] Cavendish, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 2205.

Reason and Perception

Aside from seeing the natural as superior to the artificial, both authors stress the necessity for what Cavendish calls, "a regular and sensitive perception," when using reason in pursuit of scientific enhancement.[15] "Regular," implies being present in one's normal state of mind, without the influence of substance, other's opinions, passion, fatigue, illness, and other matters of the such. "Sensitive," highlights the notion to have empathy and be in tune with one's emotions in relation to others and one's self. Shelley speaks to this when she demonstrates how Victor has failed to use his regular and sensitive perception while framing the creature. Right before his inanimate figure takes breath for the first time, Victor shares with the reader how he is not in his right state of mind to use Reason. He states,

> A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself tends to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind.[16]

From this excerpt we can clearly distinguish Shelley's belief in a regular and sensitive perception. Shelley has broken down exactly what Cavendish is saying. Victor is overcome by passion, neglecting a peaceful mindset while in the midst of creating new life. He expresses how this has led him to have severe anxiety and oppressive fever.[17] This type of anxiousness is in exact opposition to an unperturbed mind. Since his tranquility is interrupted, he cannot think effectively with reason at hand because his affections are feeble. This is not how a human should be, even in the production of new knowledge. People should not make use of anything that taints or destroys simple pleasures like nature, caring for and interacting with others.

Henry Clerval, Victor's best friend, is central to Victor's restoration. He represents caring for humanity by caring for Victor, who, if left to his own vices, would only inflate his ego further without contemplating the impacts his invention would have on the rest of the human population. Clerval does not serve his ego. He uses a regular and sensitive perception because he is concerned with the health of his friend. He helps Victor to enjoy nature again. He engages him in conversations and shows sympathy. Victor says of him, "Excellent friend! How sincerely did you love me, and endeavor to elevate my mind, until it was on a level with your own."[18] What Victor is relaying is that he made sure that Clerval was equal to himself. Thus, a regular and sensitive perception are salient attributes needed for knowledge production.

Victor, had he maintained a tranquil mindset, could have avoided the predicament he led himself into. Consequently, his lack of a regular and sensitive perception when using reason has detrimental results. Victor has thought only that he *could* bestow existence onto a synthetic corpse and did not consider whether he *should.* If he had, he would have reasoned that he inserted a human brain into the creature, and that from the mind stems emotions like anger, confusion, desire, love, and the need for companionship; which the creature begins to feel and convey to his creator. Victor, from the very start of his research, served only his ego, "A new species would bless me as its

[15] Cavendish, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 2205.
[16] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 34.
[17] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 35.
[18] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 45.

creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me."[19] It is from this selfish motive, that the demise of science and humanity begins.

Limits of Scientific Progress

This lack of perception, and the attempt to equalize the artificial to the natural, is what Shelley and Cavendish reveal to be the limit of scientific progress. Only when science is used to assist others is it successful and worthy of admiration. The creation of an artificial human and the creation of a microscope, as Cavendish and Shelley argue, never helped with basic human necessities, and can even leave others dehumanized, such as Victor's faux being. Neither a microscope or artificial figure have helped humanity with food insecurity, clothing, or shelter from the natural elements. Cavendish argues that these are the things science should yield to aid in sustaining the livelihoods of human beings around the world and implement the highest standards of living as possible for everyone. She states,

> Nay, could they benefit men either in husbandry, architecture, or the like necessary and profitable employments…the world would want bread to eat, houses to dwell in, as also clothes to keep them from the inconveniences of the inconstant weather.[20]

Shelley makes the same argument. In a letter to Victor, Elizabeth expresses her concern for his ailing health. Elizabeth also speaks to her beliefs in the kinds of professions Ernest should follow. She writes to Victor,

> A farmer's is a very healthy happy life; and the least hurtful, or rather the most beneficial profession of any. It is certainly more creditable to cultivate the earth for the sustenance of man…I said, that the employments of a prosperous farmer, if they were not more honorable, they were at least a happier species of occupation….[21]

As is evident, both Cavendish and Shelley have their concerns of what is, and what is not, benefiting people.

The two Enlightenment thinkers advocate that science should work to decrease social class distinctions. Cavendish elaborates to this by saying scientists must, "…Make men live in unity, peace, and neighborly friendship, it would not only be worth their labor, but of as much praise as could be given to them."[22] The limit of scientific progress, is that if it is not helping others, then it is excluding them, such is the case with Victor's creature. If science is to eliminate social class, then one's labor, no matter a farmer or scientist, should create peace through unity and friendship. These things make others feel included. Yet, in Shelley's story, an artificial human, though he has labored to help others, does not receive any of these.

The abnormal creature is excluded from society, despite his service to others, in which, even Victor Frankenstein has failed to fulfill. He has not met Cavendish's requirements for the use of Reason. Victor and his invention has not made men live in peace or neighborly friendship. Victor not only neglects his creation through his lack of a regular and sensitive perception, he also fails to serve him, and fails to serve the rest of humanity. Victor denied the creature

[19] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 33
[20] Cavendish, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 2204.
[21] Shelley and Hunter, *Frankenstein*, 41.
[22] Cavendish, "Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy," 2204.

companionship, assistance, and love. In doing so, he sentenced humanity to the hatred and destruction of the creature, who was stuck in a class much lower than even the beggars of society.

Here, the dilemma lies that Victor, but more importantly humankind too, must deal with the consequences of poorly executed scientific inquiry. Where in society do we place the creature if he is not classified as a human? Surely, Victor has discovered nature's hiding places, but did not ponder anything other than his own gratification. Victor's creature is no good to society, nor is it good for himself. There is no public use the creature has. He is utterly futile since Victor rendered only a private use of him. When science has no use apart from men's egos and the upper class, then science will lead to the alienation of others; which is commensurable to Hook's microscope, where it did not relieve the beggar of louse, but instead misshaped the natural order and appearance of things, much like Victor Frankenstein's creature. Science then becomes a mechanism where wealthy individuals are the sole benefactors of Reason and are the ones who can define it. Victor fell into this demise by allowing instructors, who were of the upper class and who had authority, to mislead him in his pursuit of reason, where the clear boundary of distinction between the natural and unnatural, were blurred.

Conclusion

When we leave reason open to the public, regular and sensitive perception are being regulated and the limitations of science can be addressed cohesively. Cavendish and Shelly urged the use of Reason, but the proper use of it—one in which all could participate because thinking critically and sharing our experiences are all a part of the process of modernity. They were not anti-reason. They believed in and depended on reason's multidimensionality to guide them through the Enlightenment.

The writers and thinkers that grew from this period of thought saw that the poor were not desolate due to immorality, implemented before God, but products of unequal access to resources exploited and hoarded by the upper class, who lay claim to science and philosophy. It is, as recognized by Cavendish and Shelley, the exclusion and deprivation from a lack of general welfare, that exhausts those who are the outcasts—the physical and culturally different. Cavendish and Shelley, as two women operating in a male dominated society, paved the way for themselves through writing, publication, sand new ideas cultivated during the Enlightenment. Much like the beggar and Frankenstein's creature, everyone enveloped in society must be considered in relation to one another and cared for, as part of a radical rhetoric of human dignity.

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