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THE RATIONAL SELF

Pierre Louys.....p2

POTENTIALISM

Humanity or Sovereignty – A Road Map for the 21st Century
CallumGolding.....p4

Rationalism holds that knowledge comes from dissecting and evaluating ideas, and testing them to give meaning to our lives, to develop insight and knowledge in matters of opinion, belief, or conduct. It is a system of philosophy and ethics that provides a framework for understanding existence and morality based on human faculties rather than faith, such as religious or supernatural beliefs. It has also been called **freethought**. It thus has some similarities to Humanism.

Rationalists thus believe in the freedom thought for every person, and freedom to act according to their beliefs, so long as they do not impose them on others.

The activities of the Association include public talks and debates, the annual Joseph McCabe lecture, and activism working towards Australia becoming a republic with a constitutional separation of church and state. We also produce a biannual publication, *The New Liberator*.

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*The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily the views or policy of the Rationalist Association of NSW.

THE RATIONAL SELF

Pierre Louys

I was reading a previous issue of this journal when I came to a sentence in Callum Golding's article attributed to John Stuart Mill: *Most people tend to believe that having strong feelings on a subject makes having reasons for that belief unnecessary.*

J.S Mill (1806-1873) was a tall figure in the 19th century England and a brilliant mind. His father had strong utilitarian views on education, the individual and society in general. However (according to Bertrand Russell) John Stuart Mill gradually ceased to give adherence to his father's stern tenets and became, as he grew older, less and less convinced of eternal truths. This transformation was brought about by the reading of romantic poets.

J.S Mill was of the opinion that rationality based on acquired knowledge will provide the necessary controls over our emotions, although he was himself influenced by strong feelings at various times in his life. Can we – as posited by J.S Mill – really rely on our knowledge to guide our rationality or are we driven by obscure forces located deep within our psyche or our autobiographical “self” or even deeper...

Knowledge stands between truths and beliefs. As we ‘know’ today's knowledge may become tomorrow's wrong beliefs, thanks to rationality which ‘measures’ beliefs against direct sensory experience, logical conclusion from ‘justified’ beliefs and others' testimony. Our knowledge supports our vision of the human condition in time and space; it is not eternal but provisional and open-ended. Everything we know (I quote Edgar Morin here) is subject to error and illusion. These factors have been parasites of the human mind from the first day of Homo sapiens. Rationality, which draws on various means of control, is the best safeguard against error and illusion.

Rationality is not to be confused with rationalisation. Rationalisation constructs logical systems based on deduction but also on arguments not subject to empirical verification. Rationality engages in dialogue between logical instances and empirical evidences. Let's take Descartes' “Cogito Ergo Sum” for instance. Descartes, as a mathematician and philosopher drew from his knowledge and observations in order to isolate the ‘self’ from his physical organism. Looking for empirical evidence of Descartes' metaphysical conscious and reflective self, other philosophers including Hume, Kant and Husserl turned to the mind and their lived-experiences. They adopted a functional approach which was continued and extended by modern philosophers and psychologists who had the benefit of Darwin's theory of evolution and located consciousness in the neocortex – our new brain in evolutionary terms- and is now compared with any information processing network (including computers) and whose ‘consciousness’ can be measured.

However, as the evolution theory tells us, our new brain is not just strapped on: it integrates older structures, the past (natural selection) has created building blocks (subset of genetic connections) upon which random genetic mutation are ‘played’ by the genes in our genotype.

A species' evolution structures its genes in much the same way as an individual's learning history structures its mind.

So where does this leave us (our self, our knowledge and our rationality)?

Scientists have come to the help of philosophers to investigate these fundamental issues about human mind and our evolution as a species. One particularly stands out in challenging Descartes' "I think therefore I am" instance by providing empirical evidence that in fact it is "I feel therefore I am".

Jaak Panksepp is a neuroscientist whose book (*Affective Neuroscience*) reminds us of our phylogenic common denominator with other mammals. He postulates that the conscious self is not superimposed to the old mammalian brain but emerges from archetypal survival systems shaped by natural selection. The proto-self (which he calls SELF single ego-type life form) is biological and not cognitive but coded with positive/negative affects. The reflective self (which accounts for our rationality and may be located in the neocortex) is rarefied when immediate action is required (think of a rabbit escaping the fox).

J.S Mill's observation quoted above makes more sense in the light of this empirical evidence. Indeed strong feelings push us to act and our rational self might not be sufficient to counter urges of the animal within and thus lead us to errors and illusions such as rationalisation, radicalisation and addiction.

POTENTIALISM

Humanity or Sovereignty – A Road Map for the 21st Century

CallumGolding

‘Political systems, as much as practically possible, should allow human beings to develop their potential’. -Lyndon Storey

This statement is hardly controversial. You would struggle to find anyone who wanted to live in a world that was not, in principle, consistent with such an idea. Nonetheless, what follows from the acceptance of this proposition is a far cry from the political world we currently inhabit. The logical consequences of acknowledging human potential or *Potentialism* are carefully laid out in Lyndon Storey’s ‘Humanity or Sovereignty- A political roadmap for the 21st Century’. Storey is currently president of the Council of Australian Humanist Societies Australia and has a colorful bio that includes Bachelor’s Degrees in Arts and Law and a PhD thesis on the Chinese philosopher Mencius. He has worked as a barrister and a public servant, as well as teaching ‘Western Civilization’ at Liaoning University in China.

There are a few points of departure when starting an argument in political philosophy and the most common approaches throughout Western thought have been as follows;

1. We are basically good- sometimes referred to as the *noble savage* –an original nature uncorrupted by civilization. This view is often associated with Jean Jacques Rousseau.
2. We are basically bad- theologically referred to as *original sin*. This view was put forward by Thomas Hobbes in his landmark book ‘Leviathan’. Hobbes believed that people could only escape this hellish existence by surrendering their autonomy to a sovereign person or state.
3. The blank slate or *tabula rasa* – this position is generally associated with John Locke and claims that the mixing bowl of nature arrives empty and society can freely add whichever ingredients it likes. If parents only adopted the right attitude and provided the right education, then a child, and thus society, could be moulded indefinitely.

Potentialism rejects all three of these approaches. It puts forward the case that instead of having no nature, or a fixed nature, we are, in fact, a mass of potentials. Each of us has the potential to be lazy or indifferent, the potential to eat too much or too little. The potential to let fear guide us or take a fearless approach, the potential to do good or the potential to do ill. As we go through life we seek to actualize many of these potentials whilst others remain unrealized. We now know that people vary in respect to their genes and vary in respect to their cultures. So, too, people vary in terms of their potentials, ‘We are not intrinsically anything, but potentially many things’.

There is one key potential that is universally shared by all of us, the potential to feel empathy towards others. This can be referred to as the *moral potential*. It excludes forms of psychopathy where a sense of empathy is damaged and the human being is rendered

abnormal. This moral potential has often been referred to by other thinkers as a *moral sense*. It relates to a potential concern we naturally have for the wellbeing of other conscious creatures, and the subsequent moral acts involved with those concerns. It has nothing to do with morality as a series of fixed rules of conduct- like obligations to wear certain clothes, to eat certain foods, or to marry certain partners, as many religions commonly present morality. This sense of sympathy and justice can seek to maximize the wellbeing of others and to minimize their pain. Appeals to this potential have already extended beyond our own species as many now consider the 56 billion sentient farm animals sacrificed each year as simply unacceptable. Peter Singer, the Australian Philosopher of Ethics, refers to this as ‘extending the moral circle’. The moral potential contrasts with the moral sense insofar as it acknowledges the fact that this potential is very often neglected.

The strength of the moral potential idea, as distinct from the moral sense idea, is in its being both a more modest claim, and a more evidence based one. It is more modest in that the claim is not that we have a functioning moral sense, but through empathy, sympathy etc. we have the potential to develop ethical behaviors, such as care for those who are suffering; more evidence based in that all that is needed to support the claim is evidence of this potential, evidence of some degree of empathy and sympathy. Evidence of human cruelty and sadism may be evidence that we are not naturally good, and that we don’t have a moral sense, but it is not evidence that we don’t have this moral potential, just that it was not realized in a particular case. Our ethical framework does not need to be dependent on Jesus, or the dollar, in order for us to make moral sense of the world.

These differences make the position both intellectually stronger, and more inspiring. There is a possibility of ethical theory that does not need the supernatural to support it. There is no need to believe anything on insufficient evidence. One or more instances of bad behavior is not grounds for abandoning the theory. There is still hope based on our potential. The non-religious paths to ethics need to offer not just an assertion of the possibility of ethics, but a path to hope in the face of difficulties.

Cultivation of the moral potential is needed but there are no guarantees that such an undertaking will be instantly achievable. Even though there is strong evidence to suggest that societies improve once they develop the moral potential rather than when they do not, this development can never be a political demand. The best we can ask for is a political system in which as many people as possible are given enough opportunity to develop the moral potential. Social frameworks based on democracy and human rights offer people a better chance to develop their potential than political frameworks based on dictatorship and domination. All individual human beings need to be treated with basic respect and dignity as part of respecting their potential. State demands that people realize their potential is another, and less desirable thing, altogether. Perfection can be the enemy of the good.

We also need to consider epistemology (the study of knowledge). When it comes to knowledge the possibility of attaining absolute truth is a mirage. This does not mean we should abandon objective reality as some might claim. Far from it. Instead it means the formulation of our beliefs, hypotheses, theories and conjectures. Only in the sober light of

day amidst public scrutiny does objectivity actually emerge and through this critical method we attempt to root out prejudice and error. When we find empirical evidence and reasons for supporting one view over another all we can really say is that we have the best approximation of the truth so far attained. If the evidence in favour of a moral potential is overwhelmingly strong we can therefore give reasonable support to the idea without saying anything absolutely. There is an abundance of evidence for the moral potential that can be found in a variety of fields, including social studies, anthropology, evolutionary biology and even economics, as well the spontaneous and natural sense of sympathy that we encounter within ourselves.

Befitting a thesis claiming applicability to humans, and not just people of one civilisation, Potentialism also goes outside western culture to find supporting evidence and sources. For instance, the Chinese philosopher Mencius, who more than two thousand years ago said:

My reason for saying no man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others is this. Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, not because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers and friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human. .

Mencius' "heart of compassion" is clearly a very similar concept to the moral potential. The concept is not a unique one, but has been pushed into the background by reliance on religion and/or "pure" reason. Potentialism makes a welcome call for us to also focus on the humanistic sources of ethics, our own potential for love and compassion. If these are not part of our own humanity why should we pursue them?

As we start to think about potential in terms of nation states other ideas soon begin to emerge. With the political landscape today divided into around two hundred and six sovereign states, citizens of these states usually identify with the nationality into which they were born. We possess a range of identities including; ethnicity, religion and nationality which tend to overlap. In principle, these identities need not be problematic, however, in practice they routinely are. Loyalty and obedience to strict identities above and beyond our common humanity have been the cause of much needless harm and suffering throughout the course of history. A country cannot claim to respect human potential while denying the rights of a certain class of people. What we often find is greater respect for the potential of a certain group, be it based on nationality, religion, ethnicity, or sex. However, according to *Potentialism*, respect for our human potential means, first and foremost, respect for our common humanity. If the potential of all human beings is not considered paramount then the political system is rendered illegitimate. This is the human legitimacy principle.

The logic of human *Potentialism* makes clear that a key remaining political challenge for the world is to develop a political system that respects the dignity of all human beings, not just those of fellow citizens or fellow believers. The uncompromising attack on the legitimacy of the current system of sovereign states is the most striking political reform program to emerge from this argument: the need to develop a political framework that respects our most

important, and shared identity, our human identity, rather than deferring it to our national or religious identity, as so often happens in times of war and economic conflict, and more recently in terms of the failure to establish global co-operative action to address climate change.

Since the story of nation states developed in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, political nationalism has been adopted by almost all countries in the world. It is easy to forget that the idea of nation is a story and that the ability to create better or worse stories depends on our collective imagination or lack thereof. As Noah Harrari writes in his blockbuster book *Sapiens*, ‘Ever since the Cognitive Revolution (approx. seventy thousand years ago), Sapiens have thus been living in a dual reality. On the one hand, the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions; and on the other hand, the imagined reality of gods, nations and corporations. As time went by, the imagined reality became ever more powerful, so that today the very survival of rivers, trees and lions depends on the grace of imagined entities such as the United States and Google.’

This point cannot be exaggerated. The ‘imagined realities’ that continue to disrupt humanity and shape our thinking include; religiously inspired intolerance, nationally inspired conflict and corporate inspired consumption/automation putting material wealth acquisition above all other values. These competing value systems have been gradually tearing apart the social and environmental fabric of society and no one country can be expected to address them on its own. The positive side to this conundrum is that it presents us with a unique opportunity to create international institutions and agreements that allow us to confront the dangers in unison. The Paris Climate accord is an example that serves to illustrate the point.

We can lay out some possible forms a legitimate international political system could take in practice. There is no insistence that it has to take any precise form, but must at least see a degree of commonality in human development policies; freedom of conscience and thought, government by consent, economic development etc. In other words, we might see a system with some overarching core principles, such as democracy and environmental protection, that would hold the international political system together. However, members would not necessarily have identical political systems and might realize those core foundations differently.

Instead of retreating to nationalism as a means of dealing with social and economic insecurity, now is the time to consider political systems that might appropriately scale to deal with the larger problems we face. What follows from accepting the idea of human potential is the possibility of developing a Human Union (HU). To find a concrete example of how this might work we can look to the European Union (EU), a political system that has moved beyond the power of sovereign states through gradual and steady progress. Although there are many faults to be found within the EU including an overemphasis on neoliberal politics and excessive protections for financial institutions, there is also much we can learn. Some have argued that the EU can only work because of the shared culture and history in Europe. Nevertheless, this is the very Europe that produced centuries of sectarian bloodshed culminating in mass genocide.

The EU currently requires a basic level of democracy and respect for human rights among its members and only allows membership status to countries within Europe. If the EU were to change its name to the Human Union at some stage it could allow any country that shared its respect for democracy and human rights to join. This may even have some flow on effects that encourage countries formerly in crisis to adopt new political principles and allow large numbers of refugees to return to their original homes under a Human Union. Potentialism provides a road map to another political future. A Human Union that is grounded on empirically universal characteristics that we all share, our common humanity and our human potentials.

Another universal that I think could further Potentialism is what I would call the *objective potential*-- moral potential's younger sibling. There are two worlds in which we exist. The way the world *is* and the way the world *ought* to be. The moral potential explains what exactly it is we appeal to when we reason about what matters, what is better, and what ought to be. In contrast, the objective potential relates to our potential to see the world as it *is*, to gain insight into the universe through curiosity and introspection. Science is more about a process of getting at facts than the facts themselves, and such a process can often be confronting at first. It expects us to discard previous ways of thinking after a collision with new reasons and facts. It took many centuries for people to warm to the idea that the sun doesn't move around the earth and it may take even longer for others to accept that all forms of life, in fact, evolved. This power of orthodoxy to resist facts and counter-arguments is unfortunately much stronger than the potential for doubt and uncertainty.

The objective potential would include introspection because, like science with its objects within the cosmos, the art of meditation concentrates on one or more objects within the mind--the breath, sensations, thoughts, sounds or images, allowing adequate space for them to come and go. The idea of 'beginners mind' is emphasized in the Japanese tradition known as Zen and is a familiar spirit advocated by many great thinkers throughout the ages. To see objects in novel ways with an open mind. To seek out criticism and see trial and error as life's humbling gift. This objective potential to know thyself and the cosmos is one other potential among many. If we throw off the weight of our current zeitgeist and see the world with an open mind many of the recommendations in Storey's argument appear no more than the rational next steps we should take, if we want to base our decisions on evidence, reason, and supporting the best of the human potential.

The theory of Potentialism and its political consequences should give us much pause for thought. This rational and empirical moral framework is a very strong contender in what must be considered the 21st Century contest of values. It offers a program based on hope and empirical evidence to develop a path to political justice in the 21st century. Far from being at the End of History it appears we are still somewhat closer to the beginning.