

Reasonableness *versus* Rationality: A Historical and Comparative Discussion
(Abstract)

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For many years the “crisis of reason” has been a key phrase of the academic as well as public discourses. This is the case not only in the West, but also in China. This is more the case when China is very successful in economic development in the last decades than when it was not so successful thirty years ago.

It should be admitted that reason-skeptics do have good reasons. Historically speaking, both Chinese and Western culture can be characterized by the core ideas of Reason (*logos*) or *Li (Dao)*. And both understood Reason (or *Li*) as a kind of transcendental substance behind or above particular things on the earth or under the heaven. With the advent of modern age, however, Reason in this sense can less and less be supported by scientific research and secular-minded thinking. Nor can Reason as something whose interpretation is monopolized by the Western culture be sustained with the proceeding of decolonization movement. Therefore the idea of “Reason” as transcendental substance is more and more replaced by the idea of “rationality” as empirically manageable attributes of things, or as culturally trustable ideas of communities. And this idea of rationality in turn can, in many cases is, associated with the idea of reasons as arguments people provide for their claims for something being rational or not. The point is that real people provide their reasons in real situations, and real situations not only vary from scientific community to scientific community, but also or much more so, vary from cultural community to cultural community.

It is, therefore, somehow natural that the disintegration of Reason into reasons would have turned the whole modern intellectual world more or less away from something unified, objective and transcendental as the guide of our public as well as private life, towards something plural, subjective and community-specific. It is because of this tendency that at the international level, talks of conflicts or even clashes among civilizations have been quite fashionable in the last twenty years or so.

Fortunately, however, in human history or the history of human cultures there is not only a “descending” path from Reason through rationality down to reasons, but also an “ascending” path from reasons through argumentation up to reasonableness: people dealing with reasons in particular fields should and can share the same attitude of reasonableness, which displays itself in, for example, one’s willingness to yield to the power of reasons rather than the power of forces, one’s ability to tell the difference between reasons valid in different fields and contexts, one’s readiness to be convinced by others as well as to convince others, and one’s openness to reasons that are unknown now but will possibly be brought up in the future, especially those brought up by others, and so on.

It is important to raise the level of reasonableness or to reduce the level of unreasonableness by philosophical argumentations, but a mere philosophical approach is far from being enough, for the simple reason that the propositions that a philosophical argumentation is meant to justify are very often the ones it has already presupposed. What is of equal importance, if not of higher importance, is to overcome the dilemma between reason-dogmatism and reason-skepticism by actual cultural dialogues, through which we can personally experience how people from surprisingly different communities share a surprisingly large amount of values and principles, and how we can also learn a surprisingly large amount of things totally unknown in the past from other people or other peoples. It is through dialogues of this kind, or through the personal experiences of “individuation through socialization” in this way, that people learn to be reasonable not only as an intellectual competence, but also as part of their personalities.

It might be true that while Western culture, especially in its modern form, has a strong tradition associated with the idea of “rationality”, Chinese culture has a strong tradition associated with the idea of “reasonableness”, as the Chinese philosopher Liang Shuming and the British philosopher Bertrand Russell remarked almost at the same time in early 1920s. As a kind of self-critical review, however, I want to emphasize that the Chinese idea of reasonableness needs to be developed with the help of something with a higher level of discursive rationality in Habermasian sense and to be realized with the help of something with a higher level of instrumental rationality in Weberian sense.