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To What End Are We Living? - Instrumental Reason and the Problem of the Good Life in Modern Times

Written by [Trevor Malkinson](#)

There's a telling scene in the documentary *Food, Inc* where industrially raised cows are getting E.coli due to the cramped and unsanitary conditions they live in, and because they're being fed a diet unnatural to their systems. In order to combat this, food writer [Michael Pollan](#) suggests that if the cows were only put out to pasture for five days (to be fed on grass, their real diet), the problem of E.coli would be self-correcting. It would go away. What does the industry do instead? It builds an enormous space-age looking factory where men in fully enclosed suits put all the meat into stainless steel kettles where it's treated with ammonia to remove the contamination. Forget about the condition of the cows or the final quality of the meat- the solution chosen is the one that will continue production unchecked so that outputs can continue to be maximized.



In his book *The End of Food*, Thomas Pawlick begins by investigating the sad quality of North



American supermarket tomatoes, with their thick outer membranes and their cardboard taste. He interviews some of the biggest tomato producers in the United States, and asks them to give a list of the top seven things they look for in the tomatoes they produce. The answers included- yield, large size, uniformity in shape and color, disease resistance, and shipability. Not once did a producer mention taste or nutrient content, both of which have been declining for decades (1).

What's happening here?

In a recent *Beams and Struts* article by Andrew Baxter on the issue of density in urban development, he criticizes a mindset that has co-opted the important concept of density and run with it in the city of Vancouver in less than desirable ways. As Andrew writes, it's now "density for density's sake...For the 'why' of the density question we have simply replaced 'how'". In order to do my philosophical duty here at *Beams*, I'd like to try and unpack what might lie behind all three of these examples, which I believe is something philosophers have called *instrumental reason*. Now, I know when most of us hear a dry, technical philosophical term like instrumental reason, we're in immediate danger of breaking out in some sort of narcoleptic fit. Deep snoring is only seconds away.



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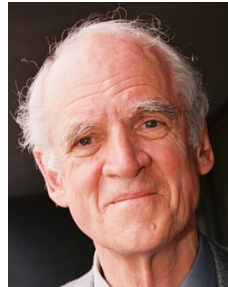


The Enneagram and Developmental Psychology - How the

But as dry as it might sound, and for that matter actually be, instrumental reason is a powerful and often destructive force in our world (which I'll give more examples of as we go along), and we're still badly in need of coming to grips with its reality if we hope to have success in building the post-postmodern world. So what I hope to lay down here in the following essay are a couple of rather hefty beams for our collective project here at *Beams and Struts*. The first two parts are slightly more technical and academic in nature, but I feel this is, alas, unavoidable work that needs to be done if we're going to protect ourselves and our world from the Beast that is instrumental reason. So grab yourself a machete of the mind, and let's see if we can't hack and whack our way to a bit of understanding around this problem of instrumental reason.

Part 1- The Problem of Instrumental Reason

I've chosen to take the Canadian philosopher **Charles Taylor** as my guide in this inquiry, as he's written insightfully on this topic throughout his long, stellar career. According to Taylor, the problem of instrumental reason is intimately intertwined with a second issue-the question '*what is the good life?*' Plan of attack then- I'll tackle instrumental reason in part one, move through the question of the good life in part two, and offer some overall conclusions and solutions in part three.



So, what does this mean anyway, *instrumental* reason? Taylor defines instrumental reason as "the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measure of success" (2).

Let's begin by giving this some historical context. As I wrote in my [essay on modernity](#), one of the central emergent features of modernity was the further development of a rational capacity that had first erupted in the ancient world. This powerful new complexity of the mind was at the forefront of the modern scientific revolution, as well as vast innovations in economics and technology. Many thought it was going to bring about a permanent emancipation from superstition, tyranny, and the yoke of stifling traditions. They believed a new free and enlightened era would reign under the natural light of human reason.

One of the champions of this new reason was of course **Rene Descartes**, and he made a *fateful decision* as he tried to ground and stabilize this powerful new faculty in his own mind. Descartes thought this new power of mind should operate "disengaged from its messy embedding in our bodily constitution, our dialogical situation [with others], and our traditional life forms in order to be pure, self-verifying rationality" (3). As Zimmerman and Hargens write in *Integral Ecology*, "The modern, rational ego sought to... achieve complete rational objectivity. So long as one's reasoning is influenced by emotions, so long as one's judgment is tainted by personal, familial, tribal, or racial factors, so moderns argued, one is not truly rational and impartial" (4). Descartes' fateful decision would come to be codified, sanctified, and amplified in the scientific worldview of the modern world.



In retrospect, this attempt to isolate the new power of rationality makes some intuitive sense. Why not try and use this new intelligence in its most pure form, free from any 'distortions'. But this decision to disengage and segregate rationality from all outside influences eventually led to a *costly mutation*-this rationality became fully autonomous and started to operate only according to its own internal principles, independent and unconcerned with anything outside of its own operations. Rationality began to take on a life of its own you might say, a part had taken over the operations of the whole. And as it turns out, pure rationality- disconnected from the body, the emotions, the community and the context- can be some pretty cold shit indeed (5). Let's pause briefly and look at a few examples.

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Written by Rochelle Fairfield

How including cultural construct, biological differences, and power dynamics in our understanding of gender pay gaps allows us to chart a better work world for both men and women.

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Written by Bruce Sanguin

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Written by Daniel O'Connor

The US economy is caught in a system-wide debt trap rooted in the design of its currency. Its economic future depends upon the current policy decisions of US monetary authorities and their international counterparts. The stakes, as they say, are high.

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In 1995, the oil company Royal Dutch Shell had an offshore oilrig in the Atlantic that was no longer needed. Shell decided “it would be cheaper to pull the cork on the 14,500-tonne monster than tow it ashore and break it apart with torches” (6).

Fortunately Greenpeace heard of the plan and the media coverage and bad press they stirred up for Shell stopped the plan. But Shell would've done it. It was simply the most cost effective plan of action, the only variables apparently



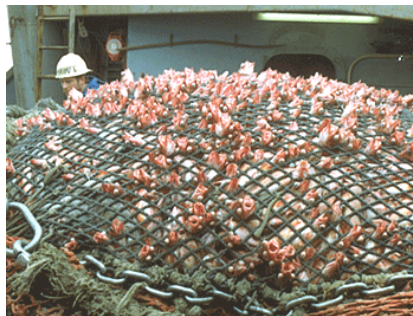
being rolled through the collective brain trust of the Shell executives were instrumental ones—numbers, cost sheets, bottom lines. The emotions, the community, and the environmental context were obviously a distant backdrop to the dispassionate workings of that perfectly rational decision.

Or how about a pair of examples from the global fishing industry. The first is the issue of so-called bycatch, where giant fishing vessels discard fish or marine life they catch but don't want by throwing it overboard. Fishing vessels “the world over are trailed by miles of floating fish, 'bycatch' tossed overboard, dead, because they happen to be too small or the wrong species. Some scientists believe one third of the world's catch is discarded this way” (7). Often ships do this because they're trying to find the biggest, most lucrative fish, but it results in compromising the stocks they're fishing in the long term by depleting the gene pool of the larger, older more fecund fish. It also ravages the general ecosystems that sustain the stocks on which the fishermen depend. It is certainly efficient, however.



The other is the fishing method called bottom-trawling, where enormous nets are dragged across the ocean floor kicking up and scooping up most everything they come across. Marvels of modern technology and engineering, these weapons of mass destruction demolish the important and complex habitats of the ocean floor. One American biologist

described them as like “using a bulldozer to catch songbirds for food... After a trawler has gone by, it looks like a superhighway, it's just flat. Nobody's home” (8). These nets also have very high levels of bycatch; however, they get the job of resource extraction done effectively, which is apparently what matters most to the mindset of those employing these methods.



Returning to our historical narrative about the roots and beginnings of instrumental reason, it's important to remember the original *moral force* behind the drive toward a rational engagement with the world. It was thought that humans would finally be able to break free from the bondage of a cruel natural world that had been kicking us in the teeth for eons. For Francis Bacon, natural science would bring about a “material redemption” that would support man's spiritual progress. For Descartes, human reason was the “supreme authority in matters of knowledge. Infallibility, once ascribed only to Holy Scripture or the supreme pontiff, was now transferred to human reason itself” (9). There was a profound sense of liberty and freedom in this new sense of individual authority and scientific empowerment. These guys were trying to improve the human lot and they were sincere in their attempts to do so (10).

Nevertheless, despite these noble beginnings, something went awry along the way. For the critics of *instrumental* rationality, this detached, disembodied form of rationality was increasingly put to use for technical questions of



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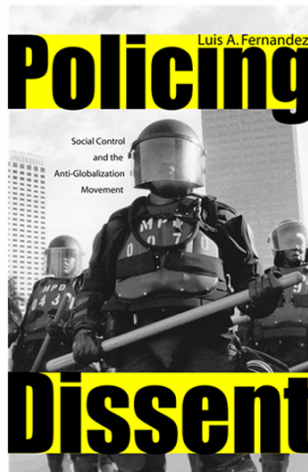


means-ends efficiency. There came to be in the modern, rational bureaucratic mind an over-emphasis on “plans and programmes, on calculation, prediction and control” (11). The philosopher **Martin Heidegger** was a great critic of this kind of thinking, which he called ‘calculative thinking’. According to Heidegger, calculative thinking “races from one prospect to the next. [It] never stops, never collects itself. Calculative thinking is not *meditative thinking*, not thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is”. For Heidegger the modern

world is under the one sided dominance of this type of thinking, and as a result the earth now appears “as an object open to the attacks of calculative thought, attacks that nothing is believed able any longer to resist. Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for technology and industry” (12).

Many thinkers have also been concerned by the ways in which the powers of instrumental reason have been used for the extreme rational administration of modern society. In short, according to this line of critique, instrumental rationality has become a tool used by elite power for imposing order,

dominance and control. Philosophers such as **Jurgen Habermas** and **Michel Foucault** have written volumes on this topic, and there's not enough room here for any real summary of that important work. However, we can sample one potent passage from Habermas to get a feel for this line of critical analysis- “A gaze that objectifies and examines, that takes things apart analytically, that monitors and penetrates everything, gains a power that is structurally formative for [modern] institutions. It is the gaze of the rational subject who has lost all merely intuitive bonds with his environment and torn down all the bridges built up of intersubjective agreement, and for whom in his isolation, other subjects are only accessible as objects of observation” (13).



Basically, that's Continental philosophyese for saying that a certain rational mind, stuck within the confines of instrumental reason, has become totally disconnected from the world around it, which it observes, measures, calculates,

consumes and controls with the dispassionate and distant stance of the cold blooded killer. I would add that this is essentially the result of a pathological dissociation in the course of our human development. One part or faculty of the human- in this case a self-isolating form of rationality trying to distance itself from our superstitious past- has taken over all the other parts, and has left a fragmented and partial human in its place, not to mention one severely lacking in **empathy**.

The rational mind who “has lost all intuitive bonds with his environment”. Indeed. The American political comedian **Bill Maher** has been speculating recently that BP could successfully blow up their Louisiana oil well if they wanted to, but are choosing not to because they hope to generate further profits from the well one day if they could only somehow manage to salvage it. This claim might be false, but the speculation is by no means outlandish. According to the logic of disembodied rationality, or instrumental reason, this decision would make perfect sense. And according to BBC Radio, reports have been coming out that BP made several cost-effective decisions that greatly increased the chance of the Louisiana spill.



So, there we have the first and primary part of our problem- instrumental reason. We can now turn to another problem that it's tied up with, the once perennial question- what is the good life?

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## Part II- The Question of the Good Life in Modern Times

“Once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of action are no longer grounded in the order of things or the will of God, they are in a sense up for grabs. They can be redesigned with their consequences for the happiness and well-being of individuals as our goal. The yardstick that henceforth applies is that of instrumental reason”. – Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*

“Better a poor man whose walk is blameless, than a rich man whose ways are perverse”. -*Proverbs* 28:6

Since the dawn of philosophy in antiquity, a central occupation of the philosopher has been answering the question ‘how should one live’. This is no longer the case in most of contemporary philosophy.

Why? Because in the modern era a powerful and important new **moral ideal** has come to dominate the thinking on the subject (14). What’s the new ideal? That each individual should be free to determine *for them self* what constitutes the good life. Originating in thinkers like **Herder** and **Rousseau**, the idea is that each individual has something unique and original inside them that needs to be unearthed and expressed. This ideal is part of “the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths...Self-determining freedom demands that I break the hold of all external impositions, and decide for myself alone [what the good life is]” (15).

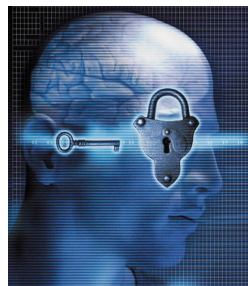


In traditional societies, the source of meaning for an individual generally came from a religion, or mythological system, or perhaps a state ideology. Often the great religions presented the way of life of their founders as the path to salvation and the good life. Individual actions were largely determined by one’s place in society and the role or activities connected to this. This all changed in the modern era. With the modern ‘ideal of authenticity’ (as Taylor calls it), one must discover his or her own original way of being. And *by definition*, “this cannot be socially derived but must be inwardly generated. Not only should I not fit my life to the demands of external conformity; I can’t even find the model to live outside myself. I can find it only within” (16).

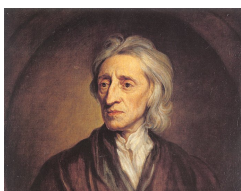
Authenticity  
~ Uncover your true self ~

Now, this injunction to find our own way and create our own values can quickly lead down the road to a mushy **relativism** – what is valuable can quickly become reduced to simply what each individual chooses to value- and Taylor is quick to point out how this ideal has all too often slid into “degraded, absurd or trivialized forms” (17).

However, Taylor should be praised for constantly pointing out that these degraded forms are obscuring a moral ideal of continuing importance. For it is a powerful ideal isn’t it, the notion that each human being is a unique individual with something deeply original and important to bring forth into the world, and that we must be given the freedom and independence needed to unlock and develop these distinctive capacities, talents and potentials. For Taylor, one of the things our culture needs most right now is “a work of retrieval”, where this ideal of authenticity gets restored to its fullest expression. This might both challenge and empower those of us caught up in a more trivialized version of the ideal to strive for a manifestation that’s more in accord with its original depths. I see Craig Hamilton and those he interviewed in his *Awakening the Impulse to Evolve* teleseries as being leaders in this work of retrieval.



An ideal as powerful as self-determining freedom is going to have political expressions too, and it has. From the individualism and **contract theory** of **John Locke** down into our day, this ideal has led to what Taylor calls “the liberalism of neutrality”. One of the central tenets of this view is that “a liberal society must be neutral on questions of what constitutes a good life. The good life is what each individual seeks, in his or her own way, and government would be lacking in impartiality, and thus in equal respect





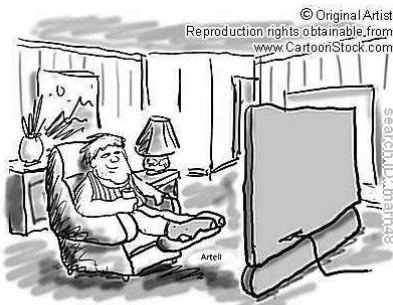
for all citizens, if it took sides on this question” (18).

According to Jurgen Habermas, it was the political theorist **John Rawls** who gave the definitive modern expression of this view. For Rawls, “the ‘just society’ ought to leave it to individuals to choose how it is that they want to ‘spend the time they have for living’. It guarantees to each an equal freedom to develop an ethical self-understanding, so as to realize a personal conception of the good life according to one’s own abilities and choices”

(19). The United States and its constitution were literally founded on this principle, and argument over it fuels political discussions to this day. In a recent *New York Times* editorial, the philosopher J.M. Bernstein analyzed the recent explosion of anger in the American 'Tea Party' movement. Bernstein concluded that the anger is due to a series of recent events involving the US government, events which “undermined the deeply held fiction of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency that are intrinsic parts of Americas' collective self-understanding”.



The modern “liberalism of neutrality” contains an important truth- ie. individuals are unique, and should be left free to choose their own path in life- but several problems have resulted from the political culture based on this view. The first is that in a society that locates value making solely within the confines of the individual, people are less and less motivated to take part in civil society or political culture at large. As Taylor points out, people will “prefer to stay home and enjoy the satisfactions of private life, as long as the government of the day produces the means to these satisfactions and distributes them widely” (20).



American, idle.

The social context around us comes to be viewed as simply the backdrop or container within which we go about the business of our private lives.

Not only does this break down the bonds of communal existence, it also allows instrumental reason to run riot with few eyes on it, and with little opposition to its destructive ways. The “atomism of the self-absorbed individual”, as Taylor aptly calls it, slowly erodes the kind of participatory democracy that might keep such detrimental rogue elements in check (21). For example, going back to **Andrew's** piece, we were told here in Vancouver that density is a great thing for our city, and it is; but as density is

being implemented in slanted ways that are more beneficial for developers and profit maximization than for building a truly livable human space, few citizens have met this with any criticism or opposition. The modern “self-absorbed” individual can often be just too caught up with pursuing his or her own ends to carefully consider, or engage with, what's happening in their wider environment.

The industrial food supply is a good example of this. The industrial food supply- a prime case of instrumental reason in action- has gone out of its way to keep our eyes off of how it produces our food, and is one of the most aggressive industries in terms of suing those who criticize it (ask **Oprah**).

But until recently, when a series of works by investigative reporters (**Eric Schlosser** and **Michael Pollan**, among others) opened people's eyes, most people hadn't a clue how our food was being produced and didn't really care that much either. The locus of our daily concern had become local, real local, like our own immediate lives with our own goals, plans, dreams and desires. In the meantime, with few eyes on its production methods, the industrial food supply managed in a fifty-year period to create a totally unsustainable and highly toxic food supply that is making many people sick (22).



What these examples intend to show is that it's an increasingly dangerous decision for the modern individual citizen to turn a blind eye to the workings of the society around it. This is especially true

when it comes to the reality and powers of instrumental reason, and the sheer scale of technological, industrial, engineering and military might that are at its disposal (and often of its creation). The stakes are simply too high today, and environmental deterioration is becoming too widespread and costly, for us moderns to continue trying to pursue our own versions of the good life in the myopic privacy of our own immediate lives. A corrective to this is in order, which I'll speak about in the final sections.



A second and central problem with the individualization of value and the liberalism of neutrality is that "it tends to banish discussions about the good life to the margins of political debate" (23). In other words, when we decide that only the individual should decide what the good life is, it almost by definition disallows public discussion about overarching public values that might guide our societies as a whole. In fact, according to Taylor, we are by now so entrenched in our liberal democracies in this culture of private individual value, that we get the sense that issues of public values "can't be and shouldn't be talked about" (24). But what a disastrous silencing this is! Instrumental reason continues to run roughshod over our cultures and planet, doing utterly *irrational* things like feeding herbivorous cows their own brains (ie. Mad Cow Disease), and we've unwittingly dismantled the conditions for asserting public norms that might condemn and contain such practices outright (25). And of course, the value relativism of the postmodern era only serves to strengthen the conviction that we cannot assert or agree upon overarching societal norms.



What's worse is that the banishing of questions of the good life from the arena of public debate leaves a void in which the mindset of instrumental reason gets to promote its values as the logical default basis of this individualized society. As Taylor puts it, "The yardstick that henceforth applies is that of instrumental reason". Thus we hear the constant drone in modern culture of buzzwords like growth, efficiency, job creation, GDP, production, exports, imports, resources, stocks and trade and so on. Unconstrained economic growth- no matter what the cost- now seems to be the only barometer of public value in our culture of individual value. And if these buzzwords are criticized or impeded from the vantage point of a different set of values, there is often a hot blooded outcry from those invested in perpetuating such a 'growth' centered society.



Speaking out against this in regards to the Louisiana oil spill, Bill Maher recently said: "New rule: stop talking about jobs being lost in a murderous, hateful industry like it's a bad thing. Now last week I might've hurt a few feelings when my response to the complaint that jobs will be lost in the offshore



drilling business was- fuck your jobs! But I meant it and it goes double for burning coal and chopping down redwoods. Sorry roughnecks, but eventually you are going to have to find something else to do. Try building windmills. You know what happens when windmills collapse in the sea- a splash...Look at the toll this industry takes, cooking the planet, enslaving us to Saudi Arabia, killing animals...Yes the oil industry creates jobs- so does the kiddie porn industry...Maybe your job needs to go when it starts killing things". That's brave talk, but hard to do in a society when efficient and unbridled growth is the guiding idol of the time.

This general culture (liberalism of neutrality) leads to problems for individual lives too. When questions of value are reduced to the sole realm of individual choice, this can trivialize the notion of values altogether, for "self-choice as an

ideal makes sense only because some issues are more significant than others. The ideal of self-choice couldn't stand alone, because it requires a horizon of issues of importance" (26). The freedom to choose is only significant if we're free to pursue that which is most worthwhile, but if we reject the possibility of values or ways of living that might be *universally worthwhile* - e.g. service to others, compassion, developing our potentials, the examined life- this victory of free choice collapses into meaninglessness. This internal contradiction has been pointed out many times before, but it's still in need of further attention because it's still negatively affecting people's lives. According to Heidegger, "humans in this age are driven by the desire to get the most out of their possibilities, without any real sense that any of the possibilities are inherently worthwhile" (27).



In TJ Dawe's article *Shovel it Down* he asks, "What function does our penchant for maximum efficiency serve?" In his article on why he'd never own an iPhone, Andrew asks "What, though, are we too busy doing?" In the comment section he says, "To what end are we saving time?" In a culture that has won the victory to choose its own version of the good life, no one really seems to know what life to choose anymore, and a culture of aimless distraction, agitation and nervous chattering superficiality seems to be the end result of this collective haze of unknowing. And this culture is



becoming more and more global in its reach, impact and manifestation.

In one of the *last interviews* of Martin Heidegger's life, he famously remarked- "Everything functions [in modern society]. This is exactly what is uncanny. Everything functions and the functioning drives us further and further to more functioning" (28). It appears that neither individuals nor society as a whole has an answer to what the good life is anymore. We're

just doing and doing, without stopping to ask what it's all about in the first place. And in this gaping void, instrumental reason keeps munching away, accumulating capital and consuming resources, applying its cold logic as it continues to function and function and function some more, content with the satisfying of its own internal principles as the final and lasting barometer of its smashing success.

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Part 3- Conclusions and Solutions

"What do I mean by a moral ideal? I mean a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where "better" and "higher" are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire and need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire". -Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*

So how do we get out of this troublesome modern predicament? How do we reconstruct an understanding of society and ourselves that transcends the limitations of the modern situation just described, yet includes its most important moments of truth?

Let's start with the question of the good life first. I would suggest that the first route forward is to firmly agree to uphold the principle of self-determining freedom, or individual choice. This freedom was hard fought for by millions (and many millions more still don't have this freedom today), and I for one am not going to be *forced* by anyone to live my life in a particular way. So we need to first agree on the principle that we can't force anyone to buy into one particular version of the good life, nor should anyone be punished if they don't do so. And we can add to this the classical liberal proviso that we can't harm others in the pursuit of our own self-fulfilment. There's no going back on those moral advances.

With this firmly in place, the next thing we can do is instigate a culture where the question of the good life is once again open for collective



discussion. In my eyes, this is an important part of what we're trying to do here at *Beams and Struts*; we're both putting forth new versions of the good life, and we're opening up those ever-unfolding visions to a dynamic discussion with others. In this post-postmodern discussion we can, as TJ wrote, learn again to speak with conviction, while simultaneously learning how to listen with a determined generosity.



I would also put forth that any discussion of the good life must now include a social/collective dimension. We must reject the individual as the sole starting point for any discussion of values and social policy in our societies. A simple aggregation of individual's living self-interestedly will no longer do as a core organizing worldview. The disintegrating results in many western societies are



testament to why we need to evacuate this particular evolutionary plateau (29). This will piss off the extreme libertarians but so be it. We're social creatures, and have been for millions of years; this fundamental dimension of our make up stretches all the way back beyond *Homo sapiens* and into our mammalian ancestors (30). It's old and runs deep. To reject or diminish it is to cut off a crucial part of who we are. Being a social human within a social body- with family, friends, community and culture- is a deep, rich and important part of being human and of living the good life. We must protect this dimension from any extreme slide into individualistic freedom.

The birth of the free autonomous individual in modernity is a powerful evolutionary emergent, and there's no going back on that (why would we, and how could we), but we must now do the work of figuring out how whole and part, collective and individual, can be integrated once more at the next higher level of complexity. I can't say exactly how this will look (although Scott's forays into *glocalism* are one fruitful start), but what I am saying is that we can flag in our discussions of the good life any view that tilts too far in one direction. This somewhat paradoxical and gymnastic "both/and" (vs. either/or) type of thinking will be central to any cognitive capacity able to envision and enact the post-postmodern future.



Inherent in this new public discussion about the good life can also be the post-narcissistic realization that others may have wisdom about the good life that may also apply to my life. Just because I'm now (god bless) free to choose my actions and course of life, doesn't mean I must also invent value and meaning out of thin air. This seems to be some sort of category mistake, a somewhat sloppy reception of our newly won individual freedom. It's possible that my fellow humans may have wisdom that I might successfully apply in my own case (31). And this brings us to a vital part of the route forward- *taking our wisdom traditions seriously again.*

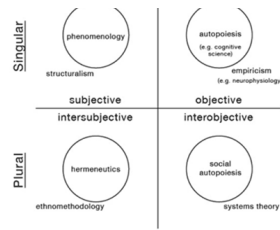


One of the things that always frustrated me while studying rational, analytic style philosophy (so characteristic of the modern mind) was that you had to make a rational argument for something for it to be received as worthy or valid. But our wisdom-spiritual traditions are full of *practices* not arguments. Whether it's the *Eightfold Path* of the Buddha, or the *virtue ethics* of Aristotle, these are practices that we must perform, apply and carry out in our own lives before we know if they have something to offer us or not. One of the core strengths of Integral Theory (as I see it) is that it

recognizes that there are several different methods by which humans can come to gain knowledge. Rationality is a powerful tool, but it's not the only way to go about getting to know things (like our deepest selves, or Ultimate Reality for instance).

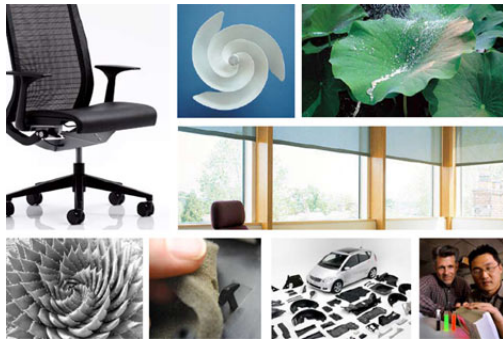


With its **Integral Methodological Pluralism (IMP)**, Integral Theory offers one way we can accept and integrate more paths to knowledge than just the rational-empiricism so central to modernity. This opens up the freedom for us to enter back into our wisdom traditions with the “second naiveté” that **Chris wrote about**. We can go back to these traditions, leave behind the literal-mythic interpretations, understanding them to be the metaphorical picture-language of an earlier time, and recapture the wealth of guiding wisdom *practices* that still lives in them. This can help us with the individual problem of the good life and with living authentically, for it’s my experience that these wisdom traditions hold many of the keys for what it takes to live an authentic life. It demands the constant incremental work of a lifetime, but the riches are there for anyone who is willing to honestly take up the practices.



Now what to do about instrumental reason? The first immediate thing as I see it is to take it seriously as a reality and to be on guard for its presence in our world. Ken Wilber, who called this mentality “flatland”, is only one of the most recent in a long line of critics stretching right back to the historical beginnings of instrumental reason (**J.G. Hamman** being one of the earliest). Integral Theory, which incorporates the findings of developmental psychology, can help us to see what’s truly happening here, which as I said before is a pathological dissociation in the course of human development. Individually, we can put instrumental reason (or the modern calculative mind) back within a total human experience- one that includes spirit, feelings, emotions, reason, body, and social context knit together. Many giants of thought have paved large parts of the road forward already- Heidegger, **Merleau-Ponty**, **Martha Nussbaum**- and an **integral map** can help this work hang together in a comprehensive and coherent way that we can then put into **practice** in our own lives.

But this is just the individual orientation/practice, how do we go about actually engaging instrumental reason as it’s showing up in the world? This can happen in a couple of different ways, the first taking place in the lower-right quadrant of social systems. Two movements in business- **Triple Bottom Line (3BL)** and **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**- are excellent examples of practical moves that are re-embedding the profit driven fixation of instrumental reason into wider contexts. The **LEED** system in architecture and **Biomimicry** and **Cradle to Cradle** in design are three other forays in this territory,



as is **permaculture farming** and design techniques (what David Suzuki called “the most important activity that any group is doing on the planet”). All of these are creating real institutional changes in the systems that govern, drive and organize our society, and are acting to contain and redress the dysfunctional imbalance brought about by instrumental reason.

The lower-left quadrant of shared culture will be equally as crucial. What I see here is the building of a *collective culture of engagement*, what integral theorist David Gustav Anderson calls “becoming-responsible”. There is already a generation of young folks- who **some are calling** “The Empathic Generation” or the “First Globals”- who are global in outlook, care and action, and who desire an ethically oriented engagement with the world as a whole. If we who are now raising or beginning to raise kids (Gen X and Y) can bring a social engagement dimension to our family life, then we three generations together (plus a good pack of our boomer elders) can lay down a permanent cultural groove whereby actively taking part in shaping our life-world becomes a part of the good life. And this could be the beginning of truly participatory democracies.

This doesn’t mean devoting our whole (family) lives to activism or anything like that, but it does mean picking a couple of issues (local or global) that are of interest to one’s family, and participating in those as an active dimension of family life. Everyone doing a little adds up to a lot. It also means voting with our dollars



and becoming increasingly conscious of our purchasing decisions. The **blessed unrest** of this **multitude in motion** is precisely what's needed to *immediately contain* the movements of instrumental reason, and then to eventually transform it (or dissolve it) into the next more benign stage of civilization.

And this work needn't be seen as a bummer or a drag either. My experience is that many people today are so estranged from the world, so caught up in the **hyperreality** of the **Society of the Spectacle** as it were, that we don't even know how much we long for a real and meaningful connection to it. My own experience (and of those I've observed around me) is that a direct engagement with the world brings about a deep joy and opens the heart to a level of care and profound sense of homecoming that we didn't even know was possible. As the likes of Aristotle and Plato discovered long ago, the just and virtuous life *is* the good life, the life of ethical and responsible living is what fills our hearts the most, it's what our souls most desire and it's where we actually feel most whole and fulfilled. But the only way we can know if this is true, is to try it. May we learn to enjoy that experiment together. A different world awaits.

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#### Part 4- Evolutionary Epilogue

When one of my co-writers here at *Beams and Struts* edited the first version of the above essay, he challenged me to put forward my own view of the good life. I hadn't done this in the first version because I'd wanted to just outline the general territory and leave this as a guide/stimulus for future discussion. Or at least that's what I told myself, but maybe I was just hiding and playing it safe too. So by way of final conclusion then, I'll take up that challenge and outline that personal view now. It relates to much of what's been said in the essay above. What I'm about to present is both informed and inspired by my own novice experience/understanding of the burgeoning field of **evolutionary spirituality**.

It's my view that the good life is a life lived in alignment with, and in service to, the greater processes of which we are a-part. This includes culture, earth and cosmos. What we humans desire most fundamentally is wholeness and unity, to be connected to and in accord with all that is. The birth of the individuated self in modern

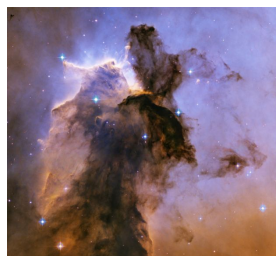


times brought about a great separation from the world as we continued our

evolutionary process of de-coupling from nature and growing our interior lives. The **consumer capitalism** of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only exacerbated the problem by herding us off further into a self-absorbed separation. What's needed now on the other end of that evolutionary moment is to re-embed that autonomous individual in the larger contexts of our lives. And for this

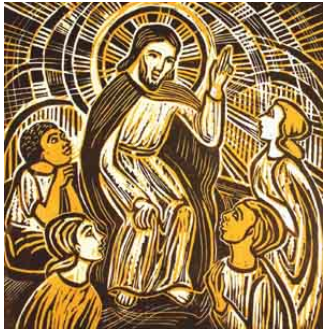
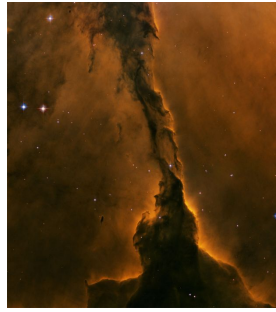
newly free individual, the good life, the great life, the passionate life, is now to be a *conscious co-creator* with the evolutionary process itself. To openly and actively and consciously co-create the world we live in.

But the question still remains, to what ultimate end are we proceeding? The new cosmology and evolutionary sciences are giving us a few starting clues. Firstly, that the universe is a *single unfolding event* of which we're an inextricable part. The **Great Story** tells us that 13 billion years of cosmic evolution has arrived at us and will continue on unabated, and what's more, is moving towards higher levels of complexity, order, integration and co-operation (32). This is fundamentally an **Eros** driven process, and the deepest part of us is called to align ourselves with this cosmic impulse and to advance this cosmic project here on Earth. The next logical step of higher complexity, integration and co-operation, is the birth a truly cohesive global civil society, and this is indeed struggling to birth



right now.

Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of “a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity” (33). The good life as I see it consists in plugging one’s life into that cosmic current, and to consciously allow its impulses to be expressed through our own unique gifts and talents in a project of co-creation. To let God see through our eyes, as one Rabbi recently put it (34). It’s in this way that we humans can begin to build something akin to what Jesus called the Kingdom of God on earth. For Jesus this was to be a future society in which the guiding principles would be peace (non-violence),



love and justice, and in his teachings it's up to us to be the vehicles through which that Kingdom comes into form. Thy Will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Jesus was railing against the domination system of his own time, namely Rome, the type of violent domination system that’s been a part of human societies ever since humans produced an agricultural surplus (35). These domination systems are of course still with us today, only they have new tools for extracting surplus, namely instrumental reason and the reach of a global capitalism. Many of us self-absorbed modern individuals have been all too complicit in embracing the material delights that this system has tempted us with, and

we’ve often silently *looked away* from the harsh consequences of that system. But today many are awaking from the dream induced by this modern matrix. Many are now grasping our own potential to liberate and evolve this world we've co-created, to heal and repair the troubled world we currently inhabit. Many are feeling the need to come together in new collective ways, to develop ourselves so that we can best co-operate in enacting this future. It appears we’re once again hearing and heading the call of Eros.

This might all sound a little grand and even far-fetched, but I don’t want to locate what I’m saying here simply at the cognitive level (although this is to some degree necessary so that we can have guiding maps/visions to help understand, guide and contextualize this experience). It’s really at the level of experience and practice that I most want to locate this view of the good life. As I said, what I’m presenting here is my own developing understanding of the emerging field of evolutionary spirituality. My own mentor in this process is the Reverend Bruce Sanguin, and you can watch his sermons on evolutionary Christian spirituality [here](#). There are also vast resources for bringing evolutionary spiritual practice into our lives [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

The current global world-system, which is saturated with and driven by instrumental reason, is in the midst of a bifurcation point of its own creation. It has reached the practical limits of its exponential and untamed growth. It’s presently destabilized and in a chaotic flux that many are feeling acutely and anxiously. This is not the time, however, to look away or to give in to apathy inducing visions of collapse and destruction. Bifurcation points are rare gifts. They represent the opening of a system as it struggles to find new adaptive and sustainable formations. With our helping hand in the new culture of collective engagement, we have the very rare opportunity to transform human society into its next incarnation. A stable, integrated, global society of some sort awaits us, and beyond that, who knows what’s in store. Perhaps the Kingdom. We’re in the storm before the calm. Let’s take this opening and align ourselves with the forces wanting to emerge, and let’s make that future real. May it be so.

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 “Our heart is restless until it rests in you”. – St. Augustine, *The Confessions*
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#### Endnotes

(1) Pawlick, Thomas F. *The End of Food*. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2006. Ch.1.

(2) “There is a widespread unease that instrumental reason not only has enlarged its scope but also threatens to take over our lives. The fear is that things that ought to be determined by other criteria will be decided in terms of efficiency or “cost-benefit” analysis, that the independent ends that ought to be guiding our lives will be eclipsed by the demand to maximize output”. Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Canada: House of Anansi Press, 1991. p.4-5.

(3) “Descartes was the most famous early spokesman of this mode of disengaged reason, and he took a fateful step that has been widely followed since. We might think of this mode of reasoning as an achievement worth aiming at for certain purposes, something we manage to attain part of the time, even though constitutionally our thought is normally embodied, dialogical, shot through with emotion, and reflects our way of culture. [But] Descartes took the step of supposing that we *are* essentially disengaged reason; we are pure mind, distinct from body, and our normal way of seeing ourselves is a regrettable confusion”. Ibid, p.102.

Also: “Over the centuries, it has seemed self-evident to many that thought/reason orders our lives for the good, or would if only passion did not prevent it. And the same background connections underlying this view have remained much the same: to consider something rationally is to take a dispassionate stance towards it. It is both to see clearly what ought to be done and to be calm and self-collected and hence able to do it. Reason is at one and the same time a power to see things aright and a condition of self-possession. To be rational is truly to be master of oneself”. Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. p.116.

(4) Zimmerman, Michael and Hargens, Sean. *Integral Ecology*. Integral Books, 2009. p.23.

(5) “True rationality is open and enters into dialogue with a reality that resists it. It shuttles incessantly between the logical and the empirical...A reason that ignores living beings, subjectivity, emotions, and life is irrational...True rationality knows the limits of logic, determinism and mechanism”. Morin, Edgar. *Homeland Earth*. US: Hampton Press, 1989. p.129.

(6) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/commentary/eric-reguly/weve-seen-the-spewing-oil-wheres-the-public-outcry/article1598369/?cid=art-rail-economy>

(7) Grescoe, Taras. *Bottomfeeder: How to Eat Ethically in a World of Vanishing Seafood*. Toronto: Harper Collins, 2008. p.78.

(8) Ibid, p.25-26.

(9) “Bacon and Descartes- prophets of a scientific civilization, rebels against an ignorant past, and zealous students of nature- proclaimed the twin epistemological bases of the modern mind. In their respective manifestos of empiricism and rationalism, the long-growing significance of the natural world and the human reason, initiated by the Greeks and recovered by the Scholastics, achieved definitive modern expression. Upon this dual foundation, philosophy proceeded and science triumphed: It was not accidental to Newton’s accomplishment that he had systematically employed a practical synthesis of Bacon’s inductive empiricism and Descartes deductive mathematical rationalism, thereby bringing to fruition the scientific method first forged by Galileo”. Tarnas, Richard. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our Worldview*. New York: Harmony Books, 1991. p.272-281.

(10) “Enlightenment thinkers, such as Locke and Descartes in the seventeenth century, or Popper and the positivists in the twentieth, appealed to empirical evidence and the application of universal reason in the cause of undermining prejudice, superstition and the blind reliance on traditional forms of authority. Humanity may thereby be placed upon a path of scientific and social progress that will culminate in its perfection”. Edgar, Andrew. *The Philosophy of Habermas*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005. p.189.

Also: “Instrumental reason comes to us with its own rich moral background. It has by no means simply been powered by an overdeveloped *libido dominandi*. And yet it all too often seems to serve the ends of greater control, of technological mastery. Retrieval of the richer moral background can show that it doesn’t need to do this, and indeed that in many cases it is betraying this moral background in doing so”. Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Canada: House of Anansi Press,

1991. p.105.

(11) "Reason and science have been overburdened with visions of Utopia where all human problems would be solved in the long run by the methods of science and technology". Kvale, Steiner. "Themes of Postmodernity". *The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1995. p.22.

(12) Heidegger, Martin. "Memorial Address". *Discourse on Thinking*. New York: Harper and Row, 1966. p. 44-46.

Also: "The technological understanding of being threatens to reduce everything to resources, which lack a fixed nature or intrinsic goodness and worth, and are unable to make any demands on us or require anything from us. In a technological world, we feel free to use anything in the way we please, but, correspondingly, there is no reason why we need to do anything- everything becomes contingent and shallow, every action a meaningless expression of a whim". Wrathall, Mark. *How to Read Heidegger*. Great Britain: Granta Books, 2005. p.107-108.

(13) Habermas, Jurgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. p.245.

Also: "From some Romantics in one way, from Nietzsche in another, down to the Frankfurt school which borrowed from both, the notion has been developed that rational hegemony, rational control, may stifle, desiccate, repress us; that rational self-mastery may be self-domination or enslavement. There is a 'dialectic of Enlightenment', in which reason, which promises to be a liberating force, turns into its opposite. We stand in need of liberation from reason". Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. p.116.

(14) "[Anglo-Saxon] moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love and allegiance or as the privileged focus of attention or will". Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989. p.3.

(\*) Definition of a *moral ideal*- "What do I mean by a moral ideal? I mean a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where "better" and "higher" are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire and need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire". Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Canada: House of Anansi Press, 1991. p.16.

(15) "Herder put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own "measure" is his way of putting it. This idea has entered very deep into modern consciousness. It is also new. Before the late eighteenth century no one thought that the difference between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*". Ibid, p.26-29.

Also: "What we need to understand here is the moral force behind notions of self-fulfillment... The point is that today many people feel *called* to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn't do it". Ibid, 16.

(16) "In premodern times, people didn't speak of "identity" and "recognition" not because people didn't have (what we call) identities or because these didn't depend on recognition, but rather because these were then too unproblematic to be thematized as such". Ibid, p.29,48.

(17) Ibid, p.29.

(18) Ibid, p.18.

(19) Habermas, Jurgen. *The Future of Human Nature*. UK: Polity Press, 2003. p.2.

(20) Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Canada: House of Anansi Press, 1991. p.9.

(21) Ibid, p.11.

(22) "The chronic diseases that kill most of us can be traced directly to the industrialization of our food. The rise of highly processed foods and refined grains; the use of chemicals to raise plants and animals in huge monocultures; the super-abundance of cheap calories of sugar and fat produced by

modern agriculture and the narrowing of the biological diversity of the human diet to a tiny handful of staple crops, notably wheat, corn or soy. These changes have given us the western diet that we take for granted: lots of processed foods and meats, lots of added fat and sugar, lots of everything- except vegetables, fruits and grains". Michael Pollan, *Vancouver Sun*.

Also: "Cancer and heart disease and so many of the other Western diseases are by now such an accepted part of modern life that it's hard for us to believe this wasn't always or even necessarily the case. These days most of us think of chronic diseases as being a little like the weather- one of life's givens". Pollan, Michael. *In Defense of Food*. US: Penguin Books, 2008.

(23) "Although many of the writers in this school are passionate opponents of soft relativism (Dworkin and Kymlicka among them), the result of their theory is to banish discussions about the good life to the margins of political debate". Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Canada: House of Anansi Press, 1991. p. 18.

(24) Ibid, p.21.

(25) "To pollute a common atmosphere knowing it will kill your own people is not rational in any sense of the word; it is in all ways a *failure of reason* applied to reason's own capacities...The *means* [of modernity's eco-crisis] are provided by a hi-jacked rationality". Wilber, Ken. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*. Boston: Shambhala, 1995. p.690-1.

(26) Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Canada: House of Anansi Press, 1991. p.39.

(27) Wrathall, Mark. *How to Read Heidegger*. Great Britain: Granta Books, 2005. p.104.

(28) Heidegger, Martin. *Der Spiegel Interview*.

[web.ics.purdue.edu/.../Heidegger%20Der%20Spiegel.pdf](http://web.ics.purdue.edu/.../Heidegger%20Der%20Spiegel.pdf)

(29) cf. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* as a study of this tendency in the American context.

(30) Brown, Cynthia Stokes. *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*. New York: The New Press, 2007. Ch. 3-6.

(31) "Wisdom is deep understanding and practical skill in the central issues of life, especially existential and spiritual issues. Existential issues are those crucial and universal concerns all of us face simply because we are human. They include finding meaning and purpose in our lives...The visionary aspect of wisdom comes from seeing deeply and clearly, penetrating below surfaces to recognize the deeper nature of things and life. To do this requires highly refined awareness characterized by clarity, subtlety, and penetrating power. The penetrating power comes in large part from concentration, and in classical Buddhism concentration is described as the preceding or immediate cause of wisdom". Walsh, Roger. *Essential Spirituality: The Seven Central Practices to Awaken Heart and Mind*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999. p.213-243.

(32) (i) Stewart, John. *Evolution's Arrow*. Australia: Chapman Press, 2000. (ii) Dowd, Michael. *Thank God For Evolution*. US: Viking Press, 2007. (iii) Wright, Robert. *Non-zero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. US: Pantheon Books, 2000.

(33) Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and English Traits*. New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1909. p.181.

(34) Rabbi Marc makes this point in conversation with Andrew Cohen. <http://integrallife.com/futureofloveteleseriescontent>

(35) Crossan, John Dominic. *God & Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*. Harper Collins: New York, 2007.

Also: "Agriculture and animal domestication did create an energy surplus. Controlling that surplus, applying it as one wished, and enjoying the returns from it constituted the stuff of politics- directing the energy regime. If applied judiciously, in war or irrigation for instance, surplus might create a windfall of increasing returns that made someone rich and powerful indeed- pharaohs for instance". McNeil, J.R. *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century*

World. W.W. Norton and Company: New York, 2000. p.11.

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Wednesday, 21 July 2010 19:51 | posted by **bruce**

[Comment Link](#)

Great piece, again Trevor.

Your "mentor" is learning a lot! :-)

Bruce



Monday, 26 July 2010 16:39 | posted by **The JMac**

[Comment Link](#)

Excellent Trevor

One thought I had while reading was that how Instrumental Reason has created a culture where a little trial and error is disallowed. How, as we seek to change our practices, find new paths, the first failure become reasons to abandon ship. Everything has to be right the first time or we're not doing it. Patience, it seems, is a dying art. And this goes against everything we know about our the Great Story so far.

Great work T!



Friday, 13 August 2010 01:47 | posted by **Trevor Malkinson**

[Comment Link](#)

Thanks Bruce, very generous of you. :)

Thanks JMac, and great point you make. I hadn't thought of this angle on instrumental reason before, so it took me a while of sitting with your point before it clicked, but I think this is a very important point. With the extreme emphasis on efficiency and profit maximization, the culture driven by instrumental reason tends to lose a space for patience and cultivation. And then, on the other side, you get technologies and potentially toxic materials being used that



aren't tested properly at all. Either way, another angle to the general sickness. Thanks for the engaged reading.



Sunday, 12 September 2010 04:11 | posted by **bruce sanguin**

[Comment Link](#)

Re-read this piece tonight after the dialogue last evening. We should have sent everyone home to read your blog. There seemed to be a lot of absolutization of lower-left, inter-subjective, as the solution to upper left absolutism. Your article brings an important balance - characteristic of integral methodological pluralism.



Sunday, 26 September 2010 20:50 | posted by **tim**

[Comment Link](#)

Let's lead with the statement of interests, here: I'm an engineer. I'd like to chat a little about about the alleged problems with instrumental reason. :)

A quick point about one of your examples: The oil rig example seems a little odd because decontaminating and sinking rigs at the end of their lives is not an uncommon practice, at least in the US. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rigs-to-Reefs>. It looks like the real offense there was that Shell didn't intend to remove 100 tons of oil sludge, which sure does sound like something worth complaining about.

Let's, also incidentally, not blame technology for the devastation of trawling: as far as I can tell, the biggest difference is that modern trawlers tow much bigger nets and have GPS on-board, which is not real "marvel"-worthy stuff.

But what I really want to talk about is your implicit assertion that instrumental reason is an insufficient tool to deal with systemic problems caused by individual actors taking a narrow view of their self-interest. To be sure, we agree that "rational actors" have no economic incentive to avoid e.g. pollution and the collateral ecological damage caused by bycatch (unless externalities like a Greenpeace action appear) and that immediate economic incentives dominate the lives of most people and corporations. Corporations arguably have a little more latitude than individuals here; you don't seem to draw a clear separation between the incentives and responsibilities of each of them, though, which surprises me.

In any case, two lines of attack are clear: one is the solution you advocate, which I don't think I understand well enough to summarize. Relying solely on a collective culture of engagement seems, from a game-theoretic perspective, suicidal. (Remember that criticizing the implicit amorality of instrumental reason should not keep you from using it to evaluate whether a particular approach to solving a problem is likely to succeed, which is exactly what it's good at.) There will always be base and selfish people; there will always be starving people willing to pay the lowest price and not ask questions. Certainly today, the immediate benefits of defection (from the awareness that bycatch will eliminate stocks of valuable fish and an agreement not to trawl to preserve them) are too high and the costs of defection too small to constrain a ship captain in Thailand from buying a trawling net. Man's gotta eat.

The other is, instead of fighting the most successful ideas and systems of the modern era -- instrumental reason and the market economy -- to extend and harness them to limit and redirect their rapacity. This is not a new idea. It's clear that Saul Alinsky, for example, was a master of these techniques. It means regulation, penalties, inspection, and making the costs of externalities apparent at the marketplace and using market mechanisms to encourage more responsible production. It will be fascinating to see how the cap-and-trade carbon emissions legislation in the US works out. To be sure, we still need a collective awareness of the problems with our current system and a personal commitment to sacrifice to overcome them in order to summon the political will to enact these kind of controls, but engaging with the system instead of being non-specifically uneasy with it is going to be critical to achieving a meaningful end.

This is also a sideline but I do have to ask if you're fucking serious when you endorse Maher's shitting on hapless rig workers before you launch into a spiel on self-determination. Human

capital, to borrow the term, is \*not\* infinitely fungible, which is the biggest and most devastating mistake that unbridled capitalism perpetrates. I'm surprised to see it propagated here. We \*do\* have a responsibility to think about these people. To include their social/collective dimension, you might say. The problem with Maher's remarks isn't about growth or jobs as some abstract concept; it's that we're talking about people trying to figure out where their next meal's coming from. Your lack of empathy here seems out of character with the rest of your essay.



Thursday, 30 September 2010 18:08 | posted by **Trevor Malkinson**

[Comment Link](#)

Tim, thanks for the engaged reading and for the great critical feedback. I'm going to take a few days to sit with your points, and then will come back and hope to have a discussion with you on these important points. Look forward to the process.



Thursday, 30 September 2010 19:59 | posted by **Paul**

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Trevor really enjoyed the breadth and depth of your article.

I'm curious about the scope of "instrumental reason" as you describe it, not having heard of the term before. It seems somehow implicit that you consider IR to be applicable as a local phenomenon only. That is, it is applied on a short time scale (without the view of, say, the impact 50 years down the road) or a narrow spatial scale (without considering regional or global impact). I agree that this appears to be the common application that you have outlined so well. But I am wondering if something such as "instrumental reason" which you defined as

“the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, is its measure of success”

can be applied on a larger scale in space and time. Does it not depend on the "given end" we seek? Seems to me this wider perspective may be what you are arguing for. And this does not mean we are actually dropping rational objectivity, for something else, does it? A major challenge with expanding the perspective though is the unpredictability inherent in the larger, highly nonlinear, system.

In terms of game theory: "How big is the game we are trying to play?"



Saturday, 09 October 2010 01:49 | posted by **Trevor Malkinson**

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Tim, again, just wanted to say thanks for the engaged reading and the critical feedback. This is how we push the thing forward. I'm going to take your points one at a time:

\*Thanks for pointing out the rigs-to-reef practice, I was unaware of this. Although it might be a “common” practice as you say, is this necessarily a good solution for all players involved (ie. environment, those dependent on oceans, society etc.)? The wikipedia article you referenced speaks to the ongoing debate around this method of removal. In the end, for me, creating thousands of oil-rigs throughout the sea, extracting raw materials until you're done, then leaving behind giant structures fundamentally foreign to the ecosystems in which they're eventually discarded, sounds an awful lot like instrumental reason in action.

What if we set the rules of engagement- the “fitness environment” for business (following Eric Beinhocker in 'The Origins of Wealth')- so that any company wanting to do offshore drilling was fully responsible for removing that rig from the water and discarding it in an environmentally sensitive manner? Maybe then energy and resources would be directed into the innovation and ingenuity needed to make such a thing happen in a way cost effective for the company (and beneficial for society). It would just have to happen, and I'm pretty sure it would too. The shift here moves from a economic world-system centered solely on the profit motive, to one where the profit motive would be contained within a broader set of cultural

values that set the basic rules of the game (like in chess, or football) within which the companies must then compete.

\*I was not blaming technology for the devastation of trawling, on the contrary, I was blaming the mentality (instrumental reason in my view) that would employ such colossally destructive methods in the first place. As I say in the piece- "What these examples intend to show is that it's an increasingly dangerous decision for the modern individual citizen to turn a blind eye to the workings of the society around it. This is especially true when it comes to the reality and powers of instrumental reason, and the sheer scale of technological, industrial, engineering and military might that are at its disposal (and often of its creation)". The problem as I see it isn't technology as such- I see technology as more or less neutral- but with the mindset of those employing it (such as terrorists in a whole different case). I also wanted to point out how serious the scale of action has become, with the fishing industry being a rather potent example of this, although one has to only look at WWII footage to see the scale (and the grotesque possibilities) of this mindset in full operation. (There are great scenes in the documentary 'The Fog of War' where Robert McNamara speaks about the cold rational/number crunching decisions that were being made in WWII and the Vietnam War. How many sorties did they have to fly etc., decisions being made at a very abstract level). The power and might of the industrial modern mind was not lost on the Nazis, who used it to service their ends.

\*"Corporations arguably have a little more latitude than individuals here; you don't seem to draw a clear separation between the incentives and responsibilities of each of them, though, which surprises me". I'm not sure I understand the distinction you make here, which is likely why I didn't write about it. Could you say more about this, I'd be keen to learn about what you mean here.

\*"Remember that criticizing the implicit amorality of instrumental reason should not keep you from using it to evaluate whether a particular approach to solving a problem is likely to succeed, which is exactly what it's good at". This statement I find problematic; I generally agree with it but with an important proviso. Reason (or 'formal operational thinking' as its sometimes termed in cognitive studies) is an immensely powerful tool to be sure, and it should absolutely be utilized in problem solving. However, what I was critiquing was a detached or isolated reason that has a clear historical lineage going back to Descartes, and which has become culturally dominant in our time. So if I'm solely using reason to solve a problem, then I don't think this mindset is "good at" solving problems at all, in fact it ends up more often than not creating them. If we can ground that reason in our body, in our heart, our spirit and our emotions, then I can much more trust the problem solving decisions that embodied intelligence will come to. What I was critiquing was reason gone rogue, not reason as such.

\*"The other is, instead of fighting the most successful ideas and systems of the modern era -- instrumental reason and the market economy -- to extend and harness them to limit and redirect their rapacity... It means regulation, penalties, inspection, and making the costs of externalities apparent at the marketplace and using market mechanisms to encourage more responsible production". I want to respond to this important point on two levels. Firstly, on one level it's a very key and astute point and I appreciate you bringing it forward, it's probably a solution/course of action that I personally neglect in my overall framework. So my question to you would be, do you have any suggestions for further reading in this area, places where I could really bone up on these sorts of mechanisms/solutions etc.? (and by the by, I really liked learning about this Saul Alinsky character, where's his biopic I say!)

Secondly, I feel that this course of action, as the only or core solution, still attempts to play the game at the same level (eliciting the by now hackneyed phrase of Einstein's about "not being able to solve a problem with same level of thought that created it"). It feels like modernist patchwork, and it maintains several modernist values and assumptions about human nature, most of which I think are either false or outmoded. So while I think it just makes basic pragmatic good sense to utilize the rules/values of this system to redirect it toward something else, what I'm ultimately interested in is a whole new set of values/operating principles that will absorb the best emergent features of modernity (which do in my view include

instrumental reason and the market economy), into a different guiding mentality all together.

And just a word about my vision of a collective culture of engagement, as it fits in here. This collective culture was not my overall solution per se, but what I see as a necessary societal step that can contain instrumental reason and create the conditions (whereby both businesses and politicians see the sea change in values, and thus are forced to follow suit) for the dissolution of this pathological detached mentality into a more whole and integrated human and societal creature. A combination of this cultural activity with your idea of utilizing modern market mechanisms could be very powerful and interesting creative assemblage.

\*As to your last point regarding my use of the Bill Maher quote. In retrospect I can certainly see where you're coming from. My intention wasn't to be callous, so I'm glad you brought it up so I can clarify my view. My use of (and agreement with) the view voiced by Maher was to help foreground and criticize the mentality that hides behind 'jobs' in order to endlessly perpetuate its values (instrumental reason, unencumbered profit maximization). You're right, there are real people here and we need to seriously take that into account. In British Columbia, where I live and where there are many resource-based industries, the provincial government (in conjunction with the federal government) has funded re-training programs for workers in industries where a great amount of jobs are being lost. I'm not sure what the final success of these has been, but that sort of solution makes sense to me on many levels. So that's at least one way to compassionately and intelligently deal with the "creative destruction" of the shifting marketplace.

But I also wanted to highlight an important point that Maher makes, which is that our overall values ought to come first before simply slavishly bowing down to the immediate short-term needs of 'jobs'. As he says, the kiddie porn industry also creates jobs. The higher-level discussion has to, in my opinion, take place at the level of the question of the good life, hence the other half of the essay. What kind of relationship do we want to have with the environment, for instance? Do we want to move toward a clean energy future? Do we want to produce food in a way that doesn't make land, humans and animals sick? If we do, then we have to make those values the container within which business operates. States and markets are human made constructs, and we've constructed the current business environment to more or less (more at the WTO level) allow capital to move unimpeded. But this is already a set of values, and one that in my opinion emanates from a cold and detached rational mind that is an evolutionary by-product of the modern era. It's time, in my view, to reset the guiding values of this current era, and to retain those important qualities of the modern mind/world-system within a new set of post-postmodern intelligences. And I suspect that there will be loads of conversations to be had about what exactly these values/intelligences are or should be, but that'll be no different than the beginning of any new era. And it'll also allow the question of the good life to enter back into public discourse as a legitimate and important subject of cultural discussion. And thanks again for entering that process here.

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