

Are We Living in an Age of Reason?

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I see gathered before me here today, a body of people whose intellectual ability, I presume, would make a fair standard by which to measure the intelligence of like gatherings in any part of the civilized world. Yet, fellow-citizens and fellow-students, I believe, that were I to ask you this question this afternoon, nine-tenths of you would answer without the least hesitancy, we are! Let us see!

Reason, say our best authorities, is that power by which we distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong; and by which we are enabled to combine different means for the attainment of particular ends. It is that that power in contradistinction to passion, which elevates man and makes him superior to the brute.

An age of reason, then, would be one in which man would use this power in subjugating all things, his own actions included, to rigid rules of investigation, and in which

he would act only after mature judgement.

As we glance over history, we see two periods in the records of the human race marked as ages of reason.

The first, beginning in the fifth century before Christ and continuing through nearly one thousand years, marks the period during which the foundations of our sciences were laid.

For thousands of years preceding this, man's history was marked by long periods of advances and declines.

If we study the history of individual nations during these times, it would seem that the earth's progress had been one of incessant change.

Now a nation would rise, advance from generation to generation until an almost incredible height had been attained and then, through the lapse of only a few years, would be reduced to depths of degradation and ignorance, and possibly to slavery. But to take the history

of the human race as a whole, we see underlying all this surface turmoil a steady increasing undercurrent of advancement. Each era encountering and enduring an inevitable succession of events, reaching its zenith, and then passing away to make room for the next for which it was only preparatory.

In the intellectual infancy of the human race man's actions were controlled almost entirely by superstition. All around him was mystery. Nature represented to him powers controlled by unseen Gods. He recognized in the appearance of physical forces, as fires and tornadoes only the outward manifestations of some displeased spirit. The sun, moon, and stars were alike to him the homes of deities, to doubt the existence of which, was considered blasphemy punishable with death.

This age, following the law previously spoken of, gradually gave way to one of inquiry, and this, in turn,

prepared the way for the one which we now take up - the first age of reason.

Aristotle may be said to be the one who introduced this period, for in his works we find a transition from the speculative methods of Plato to the more scientific researches of Archimedes and Euclid. But the greatest character in the whole period, perhaps, was Alexander the Great. Drawing around him an army of the greatest philosophers and scientists of Greece he started out to conquer the world.

Though eminently successful in his military achievements, his greatest deed was the founding of the city and schools of Alexandria.

And, though Greece lived to curse him for drawing off her scholars, the world must and does honor him for the impetus which he, ^{thus} gave to learning.

In these schools were laid the first true foundations of our sciences. Exact knowledge was the prime object

of the whole institution. Botanical gardens were laid out, anatomical schools established for the dissection of the human body, and menageries kept for the study and classification of animals. Astronomical observations were recorded on a scientific basis. and the greatest libraries the world had ever known were collected here. Thousands of men gathered here for intellectual improvement and Alexandria became the center of learning, the nucleus from which radiated an influence which modified the actions of the whole world.

Yet, can we say that this was an age of reason in its truest sense? No! it was far from being either an ideal or real age of reason.

Although rapidly discovering, reasoning out the laws that controlled the physical world around him, he forgot to apply the same power to his own actions. Alexander himself, allowed the dictates of passions to overrule his calmer judgments

of reason and died an ignominious death, a slave to appetite. His schools, a few centuries later, fell under the same influence.

As Alexandria had drawn the life-blood from Greece by robbing her of her scholars and her commerce, so she too was destined to sink beneath the growing influence of another power—that of Rome. Her scholars were compelled to think like the conquerors and, as the Romans were far inferior to the Alexandrians in intellectual achievements, a gloom settled over the whole museum. Its libraries were scattered over Europe and original research was destroyed. Passion had again superseded reason and free unrestrained thinking sank beneath the pressure of these events to rise again only after the lapse of centuries.

The connecting link between this first, so called age of reason and the second one the one in which we live can be found by briefly

tracing out the history of a religious order called the monks.

The history of this sect is one of solitude and self-denial. Originating in Egypt along the banks of the Nile, it rapidly spread over Asia Minor and Europe. While in Egypt they represented a most a most degraded form of humanity, in Middlend Western Europe, they spent their time in fasting and in intellectual improvement. We recognize in them, as a whole, a body of men entirely separated from the rest of the world. They built monasteries, cultivated gardens, and lived a life of chastity and prayer.

While Europe was passing through a long seige of religious and international warfare, there hours were made the store-houses for the learning of the world, for no where else was it safe.

Finally, though they had many faults, though they had succeeded in substituting the worship of dead heroes for that of God, and had engendered an intense spirit of

selfishness which stopped at no sacrifice, either in the present or the future, yet, it was through their lives of devotion and charity, their love for each other, and their abstinence from worldly pleasures that arrested the attentions of the barbarians of Europe and led them on to civilization; that broke the clouds of mental darkness that hung over the continent and opened the way to the "Second Age of Reason".

Though it would be of interest to trace out the development of this second age of reason in Europe, where it commenced, for brevity's sake we must pass at once to our own nation, note here its progress and point out its defects.

For years our boast has been, that we were the most enlightened, progressive nation of people on the face of the globe.

If this be true, we, in turn, must expect the world to look to us for the best example of a nation ruled by reason.

The history of a nation may be

compared with that of an individual. It passes through physical and intellectual changes corresponding successively to infancy, youth, manhood, old age, and death.

We, at present, seem to be nearing the manhood of our existence. Like the ancient Greeks, in our efforts to reduce all things to law, we commenced on the physical world around us first.

Starting with Geology when they left, we have carried the study forward until now we can read in it the whole process of the earth's formation. Botany, Zoology, astronomy, and the other sciences have gone through a like process of development. Indeed as we look ~~another~~ world around us today it seems that there are few departments of nature, that have not yielded up their secrets, their laws to the ever piercing eye of reason.

Next we turn to government ~~for~~ as man discovers more and more the perfect unity in the laws of nature and recognizes in them the true

secret to progress, he endeavors to frame laws that will act in a similar manner on the human race.

Here, again, we can say that we can say that we lead the world; for our government, founded on the basis of equality to all, granting no special rights either to wealth, color, or birth approaches nearest to that ideal government in which reason alone rules.

This fact is exemplified in the formation of our congress. Here we have a body of the wisest men of our nation gathered, from every section of the country and representing every line of industry, there to frame laws for the control of their constituents only after the most thoughtful deliberation and judgment.

Does it not seem then, if the mysteries of the physical universe have gradually faded away beneath the searching light of reason, and if our government is founded ^{and} controlled by this same power, that we are indeed living in

an age of reason? No! there is yet one point that has not been reached and to me it is a vital point.

Like the ancient Greeks, we have used reason to fathom the mysteries of nature and applied it in the administration of government; and, like them, we have failed to apply it to our individual actions.

Can you watch an audience during one of our political harangues, and, as cheer after cheer rolls up towards the speaker, who with animated speech and gesticulating arms tears some opposing party into pieces or ridicules its doctrines;—can you, I say, stand there and see thousands of men swayed to and fro by the words of this one speaker and then say that they are controlled by reason? Can you witness the hundreds of cases of the application of "Lynch Law" occurring annually in our country alone and then

say that we are controlled by reason? No! we can not. And yet it is possible. Thousands of men have already reached that period and what is possible for man is equally possible for nations.

It may be centuries in its development but it must come. The whole trend of human advancement shows that there is a constant tendency to eliminate the brute from man's nature and make intellect supreme. To create a being who—
 "Not prone and brute as other creatures,
 but endued with the sanctity of Reason,
 might—erect his stature, and upright
 with front serene—govern the rest
 self-knowing."

This is the ultimate end, and may our nation which has so grandly led the world in intellectual achievements, add this one gem to its crown, and we shall stand forth a living example of a nation where passion crows defeated and reason rules.

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