

**REASON, VALUES AND PUBLIC POLICY**ABSTRACT

Prevailing approaches to policy issues in many Western countries in recent decades have reflected a characteristic cast of mind - neoclassical in economics, liberal and individualistic in politics, value neutral and universalistic in policy. This paper analyses some of the foundations of this cast of mind, deep-seated in Western intellectual history, and reviews work in several different areas pointing to a different paradigm. This analysis is set in the context of the rise of Asian nations with quite diverse traditions, and the consequent need for effective interchange across cultural barriers.

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## **REASON, VALUES AND PUBLIC POLICY**<sup>1</sup>

The last few decades have seen the rise in policy circles in many Western countries of a characteristic cast of mind, one which might be described as neoclassical and free market oriented in economics, liberal and individualistic in politics, scientific in temper and confidently universalistic in its approach to policy analysis and prescription. Policies can in effect be derived from underlying universal principles, and can be implemented successfully without much regard for the details of history, of institutions or of technology, without much emphasis on the nature of the community to which they are applied and without much inquiry concerning the specific values, aspirations and culture of the people whose problems are being addressed. One result of this view can be economic and social policies separated from community values, institutions and forms of life, and indeed destructive of those forms of life and of the spirituality that lies behind them.

As I will suggest below, this approach draws on certain deeply rooted features of the predominant Western intellectual tradition going back to the eighteenth century at least, as well as to important developments of the past half century. This tradition has manifested itself in many different ways, for example in the patronising assumption of superiority based on the possession of universal knowledge characteristic of much of the colonial period. In an important paper the Malaysian academic, Dr Zawiah Yahya, has documented the way in which Western scholarship and literature created imperial "knowledge" about the colonised natives, and in this particular case the Malay people. As she puts it:

These knowledge's are couched in universalizing discourses, world - constituting cosmologies, ontologies and epistemologies constructed by experts and institutions that speak with authority. (Yahya 1994, p. 26)

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It is ironic that the recent dominance of this cast of mind in policy circles in the West has coincided with the period of outstanding economic achievement of many countries, especially in East and in South East Asia, whose cultures do not share many of these characteristic assumptions and whose economies have often marched to a quite different drum. Indeed many of these countries possess cultures with a more holistic approach to knowledge and a more inclusive concept of values, institutions and traditions within the national community. Some are trying to enable rapid ongoing economic development within such a broader framework. For example, the Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohammed has repeatedly stressed that Malaysia's strategic plan Vision 2020 requires concerted development in all areas - economic, social, political, spiritual, psychological and cultural. And in his recent address to the Kuala Lumpur Conference on Future Generations Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has said:

When we advocate the idea of the renaissance of Asia, we have in mind the growth, development and flowering of Asian societies based on a certain vision of perfection; societies imbued with truth and the love of learning, justice and compassion, mutual respect and forbearance, freedom with responsibility.  
(New Straits Times 5/8/94)

It is also ironic, if not unusual, that the rise in policy influence of the received view in the West has coincided with the development of a profound scepticism in many places about the theoretical foundation of this mind set and about its recent relevance to many practical problems facing the world. Indeed its policy dominance has perhaps contributed to a recent body of literature seeking to re-assess central aspects of this predominant tradition. In this paper I explore some of the foundations of this cast of mind and review some of the areas in which important re-assessments are being made.

These matters may be of more relevance to an Asian audience than appears at first sight. Few of us, whatever tradition we operate within, remain completely unaffected by the mind set and the presumptions which underlay the scientific and industrial revolutions in the West, with their enormous ramifications throughout the world. And Malaysia and the other nations of ASEAN, like other countries, must deal with an international environment whose institutions and structures still largely reflect received Western notions, and must deal with the difficult problems of communication between countries whose underlying concepts, customs and forms of life may still differ profoundly.

## **THE DICTATORSHIP OF REASON IN THE WEST**

In his important recent work, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*, John Ralston Saul (1993) argues that the rationalist modes of thought originating in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and perfected as instruments for achieving social change by Voltaire, have become deeply destructive forces in the public life of the West. Human affairs are now dominated by an ideology of blind reason, which separates the exercise of reason from intuition, from common experience, from the memory of past events and experiments, and above all from values. This dictatorship is exercised by an elite which owes its power to its possession, use and control of knowledge, and of the structures for creating and transmitting knowledge. The system provides an endless succession of answers and solutions which resolve nothing and pass away quickly. The ideology of urgent question and instant answer serves only to obscure the underlying reality of people's lives and to entrench the power of those who manage the structures of knowledge. In spite of its power, this largely anonymous elite, located in government, business and the tertiary sector, is manipulated from time to time by politicians or demagogues who learn how to use it for their own ends.

Saul sees in the contemporary dictatorship of blind reason the coming death of a great tradition, one which freed the West from superstition and arbitrary authority, which facilitated the rise of science and which improved the material conditions of society. That tradition has now become highly organised, immensely complex and very powerful, but operates without any purpose other than its own continuity. Like Imperial China in its long period of decline, the sophisticated rituals of contemporary reason have lost their roots in human experience and their relevance to human needs. They obscure reality with illusion and serve mainly to preserve the power of the elite. Hence the West is, and will continue to be, in decline relative to those nations and traditions which do not carry this great but decaying heritage. The cynicism rampant in public affairs, the sense of an inability to effect any real change and the virulence of the attacks on any who break ranks are signs of this decay.

The fatal flaw, the "grave misunderstanding at the heart of reason", was the assumption that reason was a moral force, that the rise of reason would also be the rise of morality and common sense in the conduct of human affairs, that knowledge would lead to virtue. In fact, as has been evident from the time of the French Revolution and Napoleon, the structured application of rational procedures is neutral as to ends. They can be, and

have been, applied as often to further evil and destructive ends as to promote the good. And that scepticism which was used with such effect by Voltaire and his successors to free society from superstition and arbitrary authority has become a deeply rooted cynicism. As such, it stands as a barrier to the application to human affairs of that for which Voltaire stood: simple direct thinking, common human values, freedom of the individual and the wisdom of a community informed by those values and by a vigorous free speech.

*Voltaire's Bastards* is of interest for several reasons. For one thing it will be a direct challenge to most of those who read it, at least in the West. Whether from the media, government, business or the educational institutions, they will earn their bread as part of the very elite under fire. And many deeply cherished assumptions of that elite are being attacked. For another, Saul's intelligence and experience as a historian and novelist mean that the book is littered with penetrating observations about contemporary public affairs. He documents in detail, for example, the way in which the evil purposes of the arms trade are prosecuted at every stage using the techniques and language of reason. He shows how many problems, such as the arms race, the growing inequality both within and between nations, the decline of common public infrastructure and indeed of any general social consensus, arise either from applications of knowledge or from certitude in the rational ideal. He explores the fact that the ordinary citizen in the West now has more information thrust at him than ever before, but feels himself to have less understanding than ever of what is happening to his community. These themes are explored with a wealth of historical and personal detail, from the French Revolution to the Reagan presidency and from Richelieu to Robert McNamara. Even if one disagrees with the central thesis of *Voltaire's Bastards*, there is much to be learnt along the way.

Most importantly, perhaps, this book is part of an important recent group of works which sees contemporary events as the culmination of over four hundred years of Western intellectual, social and political history, and seeks to interpret them in that light. The intellectual and practical developments of recent times seem to have given us new psychic space in relation to the founding events of the modern era. We can now begin to look at that era as a whole and to assess its assumptions, without feeling that we challenge the unshakeable. Over the past decade a whole series of works, in different disciplines and from varying perspectives, have assessed the fundamental modes of thought deriving from Newton and Descartes, from Hume and Adam Smith, from Voltaire and Mill, and from other pioneers. Saul's work in many ways sits within this genre, although without much awareness of doing so.

There is indeed a sense abroad in many academic circles that a central intellectual movement in human history has run its course, and that new trails to uncertain destinations

are being opened up. By contrast, Saul's concept of reason is such that the basic assumptions were set in the seventeenth century, and since the 1620s we have been "fiddling with the details". Although it focuses almost entirely on the realm of public affairs, *Voltaire's Bastards* cannot be properly assessed without some sense of the recent deliverances of reason. To this we now turn.

### **THE PATTERN OF MODERNITY**

Broad generalisations about intellectual and social movements are notoriously dangerous, and should be undertaken if at all only with an acute sense of their limitations in respect of an intensely complex reality. Yet it does now seem suggestive to many to argue that there has been a deep-seated modern cast of mind, underlying work in many different disciplines as well as much public debate, even if it is now under siege. This cast of mind was formed in the crucible of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was subsequently developed and refined to be the central intellectual force in our century. The major features of this pattern of thought can be briefly reviewed under the following six headings.

(i) **Knowledge.** Going back to Descartes, the goal in the theoretical realm was the attainment of certain knowledge, and the paradigms of such certain knowledge were mathematics and introspection. Only through the perception of clear and distinct ideas in mathematics or through the analysis of one's own psychological states could certainty be attained. The other valid form of knowledge was science, although the precise nature of, and justification for, scientific knowledge has remained a central problem for this tradition, as indeed did knowledge of the external world more generally and knowledge in relation to public affairs more specifically. But whatever the precise answer, the rigour and certainty of mathematics remained at the heart of science and of the attainment of knowledge.

(ii) **Ontology.** The basic ontology was atomistic and individualistic. That is, events in the physical world are to be explained in terms of the properties of atoms or other elementary particles, which are the ultimate, given realities. Events in the social world are to be explained in terms of the preferences, tastes and actions of individual rational agents, which are also given realities. In science this ontology led to the primacy of physics among the sciences. In economics and some other social sciences it led to theories seeking to describe the behaviour of consumers, firms and communities in terms of the actions of

individual agents seeking to maximise their own welfare. In political theory it supported theories stressing the primacy of the individual and of individual rights. The preferences and tastes of individuals were as much given data to these theories as the properties of atoms.

(iii) **Linear Theories.** At the heart of this tradition has been an emphasis on linear models. A linear model is one where the response of the system to a change in each variable is proportional to the value of the variable, and the total system response to changes in several variables is the sum of the results of the separate changes. Each component in the system plays its own discrete part, and the total change is simply the sum of the contributions of each part. One consequence is what West calls superposition, that a complex event can be broken down into its components, those components being separately understood and then recombined into the organised whole that can be understood in terms of the properties of its components (1985). Another consequence is predictability: from a knowledge of the characteristics of the components one should be able to predict the future behaviour of the whole, which will be uniquely defined. Hence Laplace's famous boast, that given the initial positions and velocities of all the particles in the universe he could predict the subsequent evolution of the universe exactly.

Here lies the mathematical basis of the great tradition of analysis: break the problem down into its component elements, understand those elements and then reassemble the whole, confident that the behaviour of the complete system will mirror the behaviour of the parts.

(iv) **Extensional Theories.** Any viable overall framework has to deal with language, meaning and the nature of the psychological. Early empiricist psychology was atomistic, with sensations, thoughts and feelings being seen as discrete mental events, and these mental events being the source of meaning. This threatened to perpetuate a dualism between the physical and the mental, the latter being the source of meaning. Later theory stressed extensional approaches to these matters, providing accounts which reduced meaning to a property extending over many objects rather than something deep and intensional in its own right. Thus meaning and truth are to be seen, for example, as simple functions of atomic propositions which stand in a one to one relation to facts, and psychological sentences are to be analysed as transparent combinations of phrases referring to objects or properties.

(v) **"Bare" Facts and Related Distinctions.** Consistent with its reductionist nature, this framework places great emphasis on bare, uninterpreted facts as opposed to the layers of meaning, interpretation or value that might be built upon them. Thus three distinctions are central to the standard philosophical stance: that between fact and theory, that between fact and convention and, most important of all, the famous distinction deriving from David Hume between fact and value. This latter distinction gave rise to diagnosis of the naturalistic fallacy, the fallacy of arguing from "is" to "ought", and provided a natural foundation not only for emotivist or relativist theories of ethics but also for the attempt to exclude all considerations of value from the "positive" study of the social sciences. Even in "normative" studies, because the preferences of individuals are the given raw data from which theory should start, the common good can be defined only in very weak terms, by relations defined on these preferences (such as Pareto optimality, which prevails when no individual can be made better off without making some other individual worse off).

(vi) **Universal Theories and Laws.** In this framework the role of reason is to develop and confirm theories and laws on the model of physics, applicable to all times and places and providing a basis both for prediction and for derivation of policy implications. Such implications for policy are derived by providing specific empirical premises and desired objectives, and then using the universal theory to deduce the actions required to achieve the desired outcome. The key requirement for policy is thus a good theory, rather than the exercise of practical rationality in any broader sense. Neoclassical economics, much influenced in its development both by physicists and by physics as a model, is a paradigm case of such an approach to theory. Even Marx sought to draw his conclusions from a universal, deterministic model.

While the specifics have varied widely from place to place and from author to author, this tradition has amounted to a remarkably coherent and powerful framework of thought. For much of this century it has exerted a dominant influence in many disciplines and in many areas of public affairs, with Bertrand Russell perhaps its most well known prophet. For example, the prevailing Western ideology of the free market economy in the context of liberal democracy draws on many elements of this framework - the stress on the rights of atomistic individuals and firms; the minimum role for the community or its representative, government, and the supreme value placed on the efficiency of meeting given preferences rather than an exploration of the common good. The ideology is in turn backed by neoclassical economic theory based on a linear physics model. This theory treats the market economy as an optimising system based on the actions of these atomistic



individuals and firms, and seeks to show that this market system maximises welfare for all individuals, if only in the very limited sense that no one can be better off without someone else being worse off.

### **THE CHANGING TEMPER**

This tradition has, of course, never had an unfettered run, with the vigour and diversity of Western intellectual life throwing up a constant stream of doubters, dissenters and critics. But only in the past decade or so has the cumulative weight of dissent appeared to reach critical mass. Some of the relevant highlights can be fleetingly reviewed in four central areas - mathematics, philosophy, political theory and economics. I apologise in advance to those who take offence at such intellectual voyeurism.

Nothing has changed more than our conception of **mathematics**. The rot started with the discovery of alternative geometries and algebras in the early nineteenth century, and then developed further around 1900 with the discovery of the paradoxes of set theory and other contradictions, and with the emergence of four competing schools with incompatible ways of resolving these contradictions and of seeking to establish the consistency of mathematics. The final nails in the coffin of the grand view were provided by many results from 1930 on, such as Godel's proof that any system of axioms is incomplete in the sense that not all meaningful propositions can be proved and that the consistency of a mathematical system cannot be established by safe logical principles, or the proofs that some key assumptions in mathematics are independent of one another, so that each can be either used or excluded, the choices generating very different systems of mathematics. Thus there are now not one but many mathematics, all of which are incomplete and for none of which can consistency be proved. And many schools compete as to the nature of mathematics. As Kline puts it,

it is now apparent that the concept of a universally accepted, infallible body of reasoning - the majestic mathematics of 1800 and the pride of man - is a grand illusion. (1980, p. 6)

Other recent substantive developments in mathematics have been even more important. These relate to the study of non-linear dynamic systems, and to the discovery that even the most simple non-linear systems can have very complex dynamics. Most publicised has been the notion of chaos, and particularly the fact that in many deterministic non-linear systems patterns occur which are not nevertheless predictable. Indeed in many

such simple systems all of the features of the linear model break down. The impact of a small change may prove to be massive indeed ("for want of a nail the battle was lost"); the response to a series of changes in individual variables may be far removed from the sum of the individual effects; for this and other reasons such a system cannot be analysed by being broken down into its parts and then re-assembled; even if the equations driving the system are known the actual outcomes may not be predictable, and indeed there may be many possible equilibria.

The non-linear world can therefore be fundamentally different from the linear one, and there seems to be every reason to suppose that the actual world, especially in the social realm, is thoroughly non-linear. But the assumptions associated with linearity, particularly the process of breaking a problem down into its simple elements and then summing the results, are deeply rooted in our mind set. They affect even those who have no interest in or knowledge of mathematics whatsoever. The shift to a non-linear perspective will have wide and startling ramifications, especially in stressing the often decisive role of the accidents of history (and of individuals, institutions and so on) and the need to examine many systems as organic wholes.

In **philosophy**, both the paradigms of knowledge, mathematics and introspection, have fallen from their pedestals, and indeed the ideal of deductive certainty has lost its sheen. Knowledge has become a more pragmatic, and more attainable, feature of life. Coming from various perspectives, Wittgenstein, Quine and others have led the retreat from bare facts. Theories, language and the basic forms of life of human society are intimately involved in the acknowledgment of any situation as a "fact". Facts are not given prior to any theoretical presumptions. Indeed, faced with conflicting evidence it is usually possible to keep the theory and revise the facts, as well as to keep the facts and revise the theory. Nor is there any absolute hard line between fact and convention, between the analytic and the synthetic. And many of our moral concepts, such as murder or chastity, are "thick" ones, for which it is not possible to separate out the descriptive, factual component and the evaluative, moral one. As Putnam puts it,

the entanglement of fact and value, as well as of science and ethics, science and metaphysics, analytic and synthetic, is here to stay. (1993, p. 155).

Going further in the same direction, a central theme of much recent work has been that living in a human community, learning its language, practices and traditions and participating in its life is constitutive of the individual and of his rationality. The "bare" individual, given with his rationality, his preferences and his subjective moral beliefs prior

to any involvement with society, is a myth. For these and other reasons, moral theories such as the various forms of utilitarianism which start from the preferences of such individuals ("the greatest good for the greatest number") are being discarded in favour of attempts to focus on substantive concepts of the good for human beings located within different traditions. (See e.g. MacIntyre 1981, 1988; Nussbaum 1993). This of course raises important questions not only about the content of human welfare or of the good life but also whether there can be a basis for identifying a common conception across different traditions.

The dominant debate in **political theory** over the past two decades has related to very similar matters. It has been about whether the commitments of liberalism which are so central to Western democracy, especially those in relation to justice, equality and pluralism, can be justified on the basis of the individualistic conception of the self embedded in the received tradition. In particular, how can the distinctively impartial perspective of morality in public affairs be justified from the starting point of the discrete, self-interested individual? The most famous such attempt, and the work which initiated much of this literature, was Rawls' *Theory of Justice* (1971), which sought to derive a theory of justice on the basis of the contracts which would be entered into by individuals denied full knowledge of their identities. A substantial literature has developed criticising these and other attempts, much of it from what has been termed a communitarian perspective, such as the work of Walzer (1983), MacIntyre (1981, 1988) and Taylor (1985).

These debates still rage, but some common if far from unanimous themes have emerged. In much of the more political literature, one conclusion has been that the central problem facing liberalism is the "search for a defensible good". Reporting the results of a major seminar, Douglass and Mara note that

the participants in this discussion ... frankly acknowledge the impossibility - and even the undesirability - of separating the analysis and defence of liberalism as a political teaching from a distinctive stand on the matter of how life ought to be lived. (Douglass and Mara 1990)

The distinctive tenets of liberal democracy cannot be justified from the morally neutral starting point of the discrete, self-interested individual. In a recent assessment of the philosophical literature, Moore reaches similar conclusions. None of the various attempts to justify liberal principles on the morally neutral basis of individualism succeeds. The correct approach is to recognise that moral and social relations within a particular tradition

are constitutive of the person's identity, and that this tradition will embody a concept of human well-being or flourishing. On this basis, it is argued, the problems about the self-interested and impartial perspectives can be resolved and a satisfactory defence of liberalism provided (Moore 1993; see also Nussbaum 1993).

Of the many relevant developments in **economics** only two can be mentioned here. Certainly the most influential development in economics in the middle decades of this century was the formalisation of neoclassical economics, particularly in terms of general equilibrium theory, with a continuing analogy to physics. The achievements here prior to 1970 set the basis for the subsequent dominance of this model in the textbooks and in policy around the world. But, in respect of its original intent, this model has substantially collapsed under its own weight and that of the expertise devoted to it.

The standard neoclassical model requires many specific assumptions. Over the past two decades, much work has been done to explore the behaviour of the model when each of these many assumptions are varied. That is, it has been explored for cases in which markets are not complete, full information does not prevail, there are increasing returns to scale and sunk costs, there are only a small number of firms and hence oligopoly rather than perfect competition prevails, and so on. In almost every case, the results change quite markedly each time the assumptions change. To take one brief example: when full information is no longer assumed and markets are not complete, how individuals acquire information will become critical; but the information available will depend on the actual historical path of the economy; so, contrary to the standard model, the equilibrium of the economy will depend on the particular historical path and the dynamics within it (Hahn 1990).

Two conclusions have emerged clearly from this work. Firstly, the model is not robust, in that quite different results emerge from variations in assumptions. Indeed, this work has been taken to show that the standard model applies only in highly exceptional circumstances, most unlikely to apply in the real world (Stiglitz 1991). Secondly, perfectly good models can be built with a very wide range of different sets of assumptions, no one of which can claim to be a preferred representation of all or even most of the economic world. Thus there is no longer one but rather many economics, and economics must be seen not as the search for the single universal model akin to physics but as a diverse and sophisticated set of tools, to be used wisely to guide judgement in the understanding of many different situations.

Robert Skidelsky said of Keynes that he was 'the last great economist to hold economics in some sort of relation to the 'good life'', and that in this as in other respects he was echoing a vanishing world rather than being a harbinger of the new (1992, p. xxiii).

But for both practical and theoretical reasons many modern economists have come to question the deliberately neutral concept of utility or of a structured set of preferences which lies behind economic theory. The practical reasons relate to the manifest facts that growth does not always advance human welfare and that some low growth changes can make people better off than other changes which induce more rapid growth. The theoretical reasons relate to the viability of welfare economics in the light of Arrow's Impossibility Theorem and other matters. The upshot is an important literature about "the quality of life" in economic theory and practice, which has been particularly driven by the work of Amartya Sen, who has developed his own substantive concept of welfare in terms of human capabilities and functionings (Sen 1992; Nussbaum and Sen 1993). The "good life" is returning as a central concern of economics.

My description is intended to suggest that there that are many themes common across different disciplines in these developments. These include:

*. The diversity of competing models and theories in areas from mathematics to economics, so that such disciplines can no longer be thought of as delivering the one and only truth but as diverse collections of tools, each appropriate on specific occasions for informing investigation of real world problems.*

*. The emphasis on complex non-linear dynamic systems, and hence on the sensitivity of the outcomes to the details of the historical path of the system and to the learning and other adjustment processes at work. The frequent possibility of many different outcomes and the sensitivity of such outcomes to small changes in the starting point severely limits the predictability of such systems.*

*. The retreat from bare particulars and the atomistic individual, from physics and philosophy to political theory and economics, with particulars defined within systems of theory and convention and individuals substantially constituted by their engagement in living and learning communities with inbuilt moral traditions.*

*. A new emphasis on substantive concepts of welfare or the good, as a necessary basis for stronger and more relevant approaches to political and economic theory, as opposed to concepts which range only in an extensional sense over the given properties of individuals.*

While we obviously cannot predict the outcomes of the many inquiries touched upon here, these and other emerging themes do seem to point in some quite different directions from those which have increasingly prevailed since the seventeenth century.

### **BEYOND THE DICTATORSHIP OF REASON**

It will be apparent from the above that I believe that there is much that is accurate in Saul's account of the state of public life in Western nations at the present time. This includes his stress on the gulf that frequently exists between the sophisticated games and structures of reason and the demands of basic human values, common sense and shared memories of past experience, and on the regularity with which reason is put to the service of evil. I also agree that to some degree this fragmentation between the rational and the moral, between sophisticated response and human need, can be associated with key features of the intellectual tradition bequeathed to us from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But Saul's broader claims, of the dictatorship of reason and of the continuing decline of societies based on structures of blind reason, are not soundly based. While his historical narrative is powerful and his impressionistic description of the present acute, his key concept of reason is too insubstantial to achieve his analytical ends.

What does Saul mean by reason? What account does he give us of this, his key concept? He refuses to give us a definition - "there was and is no generally accepted, concrete definition", but "the definitions didn't really matter, any more than mine might". "More to the point is what our civilisation understands or senses or feels reason to be", and "popular understanding and expectations have remained virtually unchanged" (1993, pp. 14-15). But what is that popular understanding, which gives meaning to the way Saul uses the term and hence to his central propositions? He never says, and somehow seems to think it inappropriate for him to say. Looking at the way he uses the term, its main features appear to be the exercise of human faculties independently of superstition or authority, a distinction between reason and other human characteristics such as spirit, appetite, faith and emotion, intuition and experience, and a close link to logic and scepticism. One can certainly get a sense of the general picture of reason, some would say the caricature of reason, that Saul has in mind here. Desiccated, instrumental reason given to concern about means not ends, separated from all human feeling and values, and engaged in elaborate and increasingly complex rituals. This is not a clear enough concept on which to base major social generalisations, nor is there any apparent reason for believing that this is either the single pervasive exercise of rational powers in Western societies nor in any way a necessary feature of the exercise of those powers.

As an example, consider the proposition that the central, enduring flaw in the received tradition was the assumption that reason was a moral force, that knowledge and virtue were inextricably linked and hence that the rise of the age of reason would lead to better individuals and to more just societies. One could not deny that our century has deflated an earlier optimism about the extent to which social and moral progress would follow from education and knowledge. But while perhaps unduly optimistic, few of the founders of the received tradition would have denied that rational processes could be used to promote evil as well as good. And many would now still assert that human cognitive processes can discover moral truths and can be used to further the public good. Indeed Saul seems to believe this too, not of his concept of reason which seems to be used to exclude such conclusions, but of a more broadly based and sensible use of human faculties. Thus the status of the "fatal flaw" assumption that reason is a moral force then turns on the definition of reason and the clarification of its role within a broadly based use of human faculties. "Reason" is the villain in Saul's piece, but the concepts and arguments are never sufficiently well defined to establish his conclusions.

While many of the facts which Saul documents are important and many of the trends he discerns alarming, he provides no real grounds for believing that these trends are an inevitable consequence of reliance on human reason. Nor does his concept of reason encourage him to explore some of the remarkable changes in the forms and products of reason which are occurring in our own time.

## CONCLUSION

My own view is very different and much more hopeful than that provided in *Voltaire's Bastards*. Indeed we may be seeing the rebirth in the West of a **living reason** - addressing the needs of individuals and their communities, drawing on their diverse experience and history, pursuing substantive moral objectives - rather than the death of blind reason which Saul proclaims. Ironically, these seem to be precisely the forms of human reason which Saul supports. By emphasising and valuing the particularity of individuals with their distinctive histories and aspirations, this living reason will in my view serve the nations of the West well as they address many of the serious problems in their communities as we enter the Asian century. But it will also provide the basis for a freer, more open and more equal interchange between nations with quite different cultures and traditions. That will benefit us all.

The renaissance of Asia, going far beyond economic success, of which Datuk Deri Anwar Ibrahim has recently spoken will come primarily from work within the traditions

and cultures of Asia, carried on by scholars, scientists, artists and others working in the diverse institutions and cultures of the region. This will involve, among other things, research on trends within those cultures and on the perceptions of different groups of those cultures. The emergence in the Western tradition of a living reason from the trends briefly sketched may well facilitate that task. But more importantly it should help to create the intellectual basis for a genuinely plural world, where different cultures and traditions can co-operate, compete and debate on the basis of mutual respect and equality.

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