

***Restoration of Reason:
The Eclipse and Recovery of Truth Goodness and Beauty.***

Montague Brown.
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Francis Bacon had it wrong. So claims Montague Brown, the Richard L. Bready Professor of Ethics, Economics and the Common Good at New Hampshire's St. Anselm College in *Restoration of Reason*. Brown, who also chairs the philosophy department at St. Anselm, sees in Bacon's reliance on the scientific method the beginning of a failed modern philosophical project to liberate reason, which now, in the 21st century, needs rescuing once again.

Brown argues that while the modern project to understand reality sought to restore reason to its privileged place apart from metaphysics, instead, through its reliance on a unified method, it has proved to cripple our intelligence, moved us to reject freedom and responsibility, and has blinded us to beauty. Brown's project seeks to rescue reason from the restrictions placed upon it by modern philosophy's search for unified theories by returning to the premodern sources of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and Augustine, where he finds "the rich diversity of reason" that can help us find the true, the good and the beautiful.

While his work is systematic, in the process, Brown offers a coherent and accessible history of modern philosophy. He moves from Bacon to Friedrich Nietzsche, and then to Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel, who, according to Brown, begin philosophy's corrective moves, before entering the 20th century with a sympathetic treatment of Alfred North Whitehead and Bernard Lonergan. Brown then provides his

own broad-based solutions over against modernism's narrow distortions of reason as he sees it.

The problem with the modern project, Brown argues, is that its thinkers, in their search for the appropriate ordering principle for the limitations of the intellect, may have fueled advances in science and technology to the unnecessary harm of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. Thus Brown takes to task the two traditions that developed from the work of early modern work of Bacon, René Descartes and Thomas Hobbes – empiricism and rationalism. The empiricists, starting from the position that all knowledge must originate and be verified through the senses, include John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. By relying on this single method, this attempt to explain everything “proves to be unable to explain anything,” not even science. Thought becomes unintelligible, leading to skepticism, in which “taste and sentiment reign supreme over all areas that had once been held to be the provenance of reason” (111). The rationalists – Baruch Spinoza, Nicolas Malebranche, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and Nietzsche – fare little better, for they also rely on a single method, that of judging all on the basis of innate ideas rather than experience. While they better account for thought and freedom than do the empiricists, the rationalists are, in the end, irrational, Brown argues. This irrationalism is exemplified by Nietzsche, whose rationalism sans God and his focus on the self places our choices at the mercy of physiological urges. For Brown, both Hume and Nietzsche, in their rigorous methodical consistency, reveal the weakness of the modern project.

Given the rules of the game established by their predecessors, Hume and Nietzsche could be said to be the best players. That their games are absurd merely follows from the absurdity of the first principles. Only by accepting other first principles could the outcomes of the games have been different. Such a move they were either unable or unwilling to make. That is their tragedy and the tragedy of modern thought in general. (141)

Despite the benefits of technological and scientific progress it fostered, the modern method has left considerable damage in its wake, namely the loss of

truth, the destruction of moral foundations, and the emasculation of our sense of beauty, Brown argues. By removing the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, modern philosophy has shortchanged a search for what is true, undercutting wonder, understanding and progress with general mathematical laws. Likewise our sense of the good – who we ought to be and what we ought to do – is lost, given the modern method’s demand for theoretical principle. Finally, “delight in beauty” suffers, as the idea of contemplation as a worthy end is lost and aesthetic judgments become merely subjective. Science, too, suffers, as “frontier questions are rejected because they do not fit the current system” (143).

Faced with this deficit, Brown’s own restorative project is built on the thesis that human knowledge need not conform to a singular method, for its principles “are irreducibly multiple, corresponding to distinct operations of the intellect” (208). Drawing upon the works of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas and their epistemological starting point, Brown claims that reason operates in three distinct, yet overlapping, realms of theoretical science, ethics and politics, and aesthetics and art, each with its own first principles. Brown writes,

In an age where the scientific/technological paradigm with its demands for specialization tend to dominate, there is the grave danger of adopting one set of principles or one viewpoint for everything. To understand that the essence of ethics cannot be reached by scientific method, that great literature is not reducible to ethical or political themes, that history is not reducible to metaphysics, nor metaphysics to historical conditions, is to guard against the enslavement of the human spirit. (235-236)

While Brown is not alone in his criticism of modernism’s abuse of reason, his creative reclaiming of premodern sources is a welcome voice in the continuing dialogue. His drawing upon Aquinas, for example, in understanding freedom of choice as necessary to the first principle of practical reason – pursue good and avoid evil – illumines a method for ethics that when approached through the sister realm of theoretical science can be at best inconclusive or at worst absurd. Brown’s work to

rescue the intellect from modern reductionism by rediscovering its “diverse riches” is particularly relevant in a historical moment in which, for example, the walls between theology and science are buttressed. Drawing from Lonergan, Brown reminds us that “As valuers of truth, experts in the various disciplines share a common ground beyond their specialties. If they were to become aware of this ground ... they would welcome each other’s insights.” Brown’s work certainly shines light upon this common ground.

Brown acknowledges in an extended footnote that others, such as ethicist Jean Porter, who also are working to recover the work of the premoderns, do not arrive at the same conclusions of reasons’ distinct functioning across the true, the good and the beautiful, especially in regard to the place of metaphysics. Yet other important voices are left largely unaddressed in his trajectory. One can hardly mention modern critique without recalling postmodernists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan or Richard Rorty. But Brown dismisses postmodernism in less than a paragraph, positing this philosophy under the influence of Nietzsche and charging it with the abandonment of reason altogether. Yet just as we cannot turn to the wisdom of the premoderns as if modernism never happened, neither can we do so as if Derrida and company never spoke.

That said, *Restoration of Reason* provides a clear and expansive picture of how we have arrived at this threshold of reason’s alleged demise. In this philosophical project Brown in the process provides an accessible history to engage not only the philosopher or academic theologian, but also the practicing pastor and layperson. Especially relevant is the thread of his analysis regarding how questions of God have been asked, answered and pushed aside throughout the modern period, why those questions remain relevant, and how a return to western classics in philosophy and religion hold such promise for a continued struggle to understand what is true, good and beautiful without requiring a zero-sum game.