

# Topsyturvy - Jonathan Swift on Human Nature, Reason, and Morality

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## *1. Slave of the Passions*

Famously, David Hume once remarked, in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, that “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Swift would certainly have agreed with the first and last part of this claim (that reason *is* the slave of the passions and can never *pretend* to be anything else) because he thought that human nature was such that the way we employ our reasoning faculties is always guided by our passions – which, for most of us most of the time, means our vices. Despite having the ability to reason we are ultimately not very reasonable creatures. Rather, we are fundamentally, naturally biased, seeking primarily to satisfy our greed, lust, malice, envy and other base impulses, using reason not as a guiding principle, but merely as a means, a powerful tool that helps us get what we want. As the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt put it, reason is like a tail that is being wagged by an emotional dog.<sup>2</sup> However, while for Hume this dependency of reason on our passions is just as it should be (mainly because we can largely rely on our moral sentiments and especially our ability to sympathize with others to steer us in an agreeable direction), Swift tended to see it as proof that reason simply cannot be trusted. Since we are not fundamentally good, but by and large, when stripped of the rather thin veneer of civilization, a race of Yahoos, of nasty, mean-spirited, lecherous, dirty and generally unsavoury brutes, reason carries with it the corruptions of our nature. After all, “all the virtues that have been ever in mankind are to be counted upon a few fingers; but his follies and vices are innumerable and time adds hourly to the heap.” (*A Tale of a Tub*, MW 84) So it is mainly those follies and vices that reason serves and supports.

For Swift, the corruption of reason becomes particularly evident when we consider all the devices and ingenious methods to hurt and kill each other that our reason has allowed us to

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature* 2.3.3.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment*, *Psychological Review* 108/4 (2001): 814-834.

develop. Because we are animals that use the reason we have got to produce deadly weapons, that is, means of (self)destruction, it is highly questionable just *how* reasonable we actually are. Not very, apparently, because if we were *really* reasonable, we would live in peace with each other, as the Houyhnhnms do, that equine race of noble reasoners that Gulliver encounters in the last of his travels. The Houyhnhnms are the embodiment of Kantian righteousness with their inability to even contemplate the possibility of saying “the Thing which is not”, i.e. to lie. They never (with one notable exception, which we will discuss later) even argue with each other because in order to argue there would have to be room for doubt about what is true and what is not. To allow an argument there must be room for different ways of seeing the world and engaging with it. Yet if you are guided by reason alone, then, it seems, all differences in opinion disappear, and everyone by necessity agrees with each other. When reason rules, then everyone speaks with the same voice. Disagreement, the most extreme expression of which is war, is a sure sign of a serious limitation (or corruption) of our reasoning faculties, and having such a limited reason might be worse, that is, more harmful and destructive, than having no reason at all: “But when a creature pretending to Reason, could be capable of such Enormities, he [Gulliver’s Houyhnhnm host] dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality<sup>3</sup> itself. He seemed therefore confident, that instead of Reason, we were only possessed of some Quality fitted to increase our natural Vices; as the Reflection from a troubled Stream returns the Image of an ill-shapen Body, not only *larger*, but more *distorted*.” (GT 228)

Thus, on closer inspection, we are not reasonable creatures at all. Rather, we are creatures that are quite good at *pretending* to be reasonable. And what we have and use is not really reason at all, but some inferior *ersatz* ability that only serves to magnify and blow up the flaws of our nature. True reason leads and rules. It doesn’t follow and serve. True reason (and here Swift once again foreshadows Kant) coincides with virtue, with the morally good will. The perfectly reasonable or rational creature must also be perfectly good. Since we are quite obviously not perfectly good, we cannot be perfectly rational either. Not only do we deceive ourselves if and whenever we think we are, we also derive a wholly inappropriate pride from our presumed intellectual superiority which leads us to mistakenly conclude that we are particularly well positioned among all animals to gain a clear understanding and knowledge of the world and to give advice on how things should be and people should behave. In his

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<sup>3</sup> Here the word “brutality” does not mean what it is commonly taken to mean today, namely the quality of being brutal. Rather, the word signifies the quality of being a “brute”, that is, an animal (which is believed to possess no reason).

*Meditation on a Broom-Stick* (where the broom-stick represents human nature) Swift describes Man as a “topsy-turvy creature, his animal faculties perpetually mounted on his rational, his head where his heels should be, grovelling on the earth! And yet with all his faults, he sets up to be an universal reformer and corrector of abuses, a remover of grievances, rakes into every slut’s corner of Nature, bringing hidden corruptions to the light, and raises a mighty dust where there was none before; sharing deeply all the while in the very same pollutions he pretends to sweep away.” (*Meditation on a Broom-Stick*, MW 60)

## 2. Reason Unchained

And yet, when reason rules completely, uncorrupted because unaffected by any passions good or bad, when the head does never grovel on the earth, but is at all times kept high up in the air where it supposedly belongs, all is not well either. The virtue of the perfectly rational being as we encounter it in Swift’s Houyhnhnms is not of the loving, humble, and empathic kind. Rather, it is the sober, unforgiving virtue of a Saint-Just. Admirable perhaps, but also strangely cold and detached. Under the right circumstances, it can even be deadly. The Houyhnhnms, as exemplary as they may appear to Gulliver, are very conscious of their own value and superiority. They have little interest in, or regard for, anything that does not meet their own standards of perfection. They are intolerant of the flaws and weaknesses of others, even if those others belong to their own species. They are extremely class-conscious. Some Houyhnhnm breeds are considered inferior and can never hope to do anything but work as domestics for the nobler families. Any interbreeding, any mixture of the races, is prevented. Their mating follows strict eugenic principles. And for all their praise of friendship and benevolence, friendship between a Houyhnhnm and a Yahoo is nothing less than unthinkable. They positively detest all Yahoos, whom they use for forced labour and whom they kill, when expedient, without a second thought. Even Gulliver, that strange creature that has “all the Qualities of a Yahoo, only a little more civilized by some Tincture of Reason” (GT 250) is never treated as an equal by them. That he could be an equal never even crosses their minds. He is simply not rational enough, which means: not good enough. For his equine “master” he is little more than a clever pet, an entertaining curiosity of nature. For other Houyhnhnms he is not even that, and they take offence when his host begins to spend too much time with Gulliver, which they find wholly inappropriate and “not agreeable to Reason or Nature” (GT 256). As a result, they demand that Gulliver either be treated like all the other

Yahoos, namely as a working slave, or be commanded to swim back to where he came from. The first option is quickly rejected out of fear that Gulliver, who is after all equipped with some “Rudiments of Reason”, may incite the other Yahoos to rise against their masters in open rebellion, which leaves only the second option. All his master can do is postpone the time of Gulliver’s departure, so that he can at least build himself a boat, which gives him a small chance of survival. He should actually count himself lucky: the Houyhnhnms could just as well have killed him, which is exactly what they consider doing with all the other Yahoos, as the majority of them thinks that the Yahoos are vermin that “should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth” (GT249). Gulliver’s equine master then suggests the supposedly more humane method of castrating them, which would not only make them tamer and easier to handle, but would in a very short time also have the desired effect of putting an end to the whole species. Their work could then be done by asses, which are more comely and can be more easily kept. The Houyhnhnms thus combine a Kantian self-righteousness and idolisation of reason with a Utilitarian penchant for efficient and practical solutions.

Yet is it not in *Gulliver’s Travels* that Swift shows us most clearly that it is quite possible to be perfectly reasonable and at the same time perfectly evil, but in his other masterpiece, the marvellous, bitter, and still chillingly current *Modest Proposal*. With its baroque title, *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or the Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public* is a blueprint for all political reformers who are willing to sell their own grandmother (let alone legions of strangers) if there was some chance that this would contribute to what they think of as the greater good. What the (anonymous) author seemingly proposes is that - in order to solve the Irish problem, that is, to end the abject poverty in an Ireland that has for almost two centuries been mercilessly exploited by the English Crown and her Anglo-Irish representatives - the children of the poor Catholic majority should be, at the age of one year, sold as a delicacy to the rich landowners. If, he reasons, 100,000 of the current 120,000 Irish children born every year were thus provided for (leaving the rest for breeding purposes), it would ultimately benefit everyone. It would provide an urgently needed boost for the Irish economy. Beggars would disappear from the street, and so would thieves, because it would no longer be necessary for the Irish to beg and steal to survive. Everyone would have enough to eat. Nobody would have to starve. Women would no longer be forced to abort their unborn children for fear of not being able to feed them, those “poor innocent babes”. It is even good for the children themselves because this way they are spared a life full of misery (and that is

all they could ever hope for if they lived). This is clearly a win-win proposal then, especially since one-year olds are really quite tasty, so that it won't prove difficult to find well-to-do buyers who are willing to pay a good price for them: "I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child, well nursed, is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether *stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled*, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a *fricassee*, or a *ragout*." (*A Modest Proposal*, MW 494) And it is not as expensive as one may think. Those for whom it would otherwise not be affordable will find that they can save money by not letting anything go to waste: "Those who are more thrifty (*as I must confess the times require*) may flay the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable *gloves for ladies*, and *summer boots for fine gentlemen*." (MW 495)

This proposal is of course outrageous and shocking, but it is at the same time perfectly, ostentatiously reasonable. The author professes to be motivated not by any personal interest in the matter, but by his love for humanity, his benevolence, and we are given no reason to doubt him. He genuinely wants to help, and given that there is no political will to go easier on the Irish and to end their relentless exploitation, the author's proposal can be seen to provide not only an elegant solution to the Irish problem, but indeed, under the circumstances, the most *humane* one. The only objection we could raise against the proposal is a *moral* one, namely that it is would be *a horrible thing to routinely breed and kill human babies for food*, no matter how beneficial that would be for the population as a whole, how much it would increase the average well-being. However, if we asked our contemporary bioethicists whether killing babies actually *is* morally wrong, we might find quite a few who would tell us that it is not really wrong at all because infants up to a certain age do not experience themselves as an entity with a past and, more importantly, a future, which means they have no *concept* of themselves and their possible death and hence no *interest* in avoiding death. Those ethicists would further assure us that since rights depend on interests in the sense that in order to have right to something you need to at least have an interest in it, we can safely conclude that infants don't have any right to life and can therefore not be wronged, or harmed, by being killed.<sup>4</sup> The alleged harm proves to be, on closer inspection, a fiction. In comparison, the *public benefit* that can be gained from killing babies appears to be concrete and real. This is, apparently, what *reason* tells us. If we nonetheless insist that it is still *wrong* to kill babies,

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, "After-Birth Abortion: Why Should the Baby Live?", *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39 (2013): 261-3.

then we are just indulging our irrational prejudices. Yet what is conveniently forgotten here is that *all* morality is fundamentally irrational in the sense that we can reason as much as we want, we will never derive any moral precepts from it or find out, once and for all, what is right and what is wrong. In order to know what is right and wrong, good and bad, we need to rely on some moral intuition, which reason can then use as a *starting point*. It can never be the *result* of a reasoning process. The fictional author of Swift's *Modest Proposal* also relies on a quasi-moral intuition in so far as the starting point for his argument is the "deplorable state of the kingdom", which he regards as intolerable. But the solution he subsequently offers is computational and unfettered by compassion, imagination, or any real concern for the individual. He also appears to be unaware of how bitterly *cruel* it actually is to ask parents to produce children for the sole purpose of selling them as Sunday roasts to the rich. And it is precisely the tone of righteous reasonableness that makes the proposal so horrible. The perfectly reasonable and the indifferent tend to coincide. The link between them is the deliberate exclusion of what Hume called the passions and what we may more properly call *empathy*. Swift himself was well aware of this connection: "Indifference, clad in wisdom's guise,/ All fortitude of mind supplies:/ For how can stony bowels melt/ In those who never pity felt?" (*On the Death of Dr. Swift*, MW 521) What his *Modest Proposal* ultimately illustrates is what Hannah Arendt called the "banality of evil".<sup>5</sup> Its author is an early 18<sup>th</sup> century British Empire incarnation of Adolf Eichmann: a monster that has no idea that it is one and that would be very surprised and genuinely offended if we accused him of being one.

Reason, left entirely to its own devices, borders on madness. Its hallmark is its utter detachedness. Swift would have approved of G.K. Chesterton's quip that "the madman is not the man who has lost his reason", but "the man who has lost everything *except* his reason".<sup>6</sup> He liked to make fun of philosophers who seek to squeeze the whole rich and multifaceted fabric of the world into some rational *system* or other, be it moral or otherwise. All the system-building, the obsessive rationalisation of the world results from a peculiar kind of insanity. That is why new schemes in philosophy often appear to "unrefined reason" indistinguishable from the ideas of lunatics. "For what man in the natural state or course of thinking, did ever conceive it in his power to reduce the notions of all mankind exactly to the

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, New York: John Lane 1909, 32: "If you argue with a madman, it is extremely probable that you will get the worst of it; for in many ways his mind moves all the quicker for not being delayed by things that go with good judgment. He is not hampered by a sense of humour or by clarity, or by the dumb certainties of experience. He is the more logical for losing certain sane affections. Indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason."

same length, and breadth, and height of his own? Yet this is the first humble and civil design of all innovators in the realm of reason.” (*A Tale of a Tub*, MW 141) The philosophical system builder (and this includes the moral philosopher who seeks to trace the whole of morality back to a fixed set of principles, such as the “greatest good of the greatest number” or “universalizability”) cannot tolerate the incommensurable. Reason demands that differences be not ultimate, that they disappear on some higher level of understanding. A common measure *must* be found, the many reduced to the one, the essential brought to the light, the inessential cast into the shadows. Yet if the world is just as much many as it is one (as the great William James suggested a couple of centuries later, insisting that “reality may exist in distributive form, in the shape not of an all but of a set of eaches, just as it seems to”<sup>7</sup>), then reason leads us astray, away from the reality of the many, the divergent, the seemingly inessential. And since our tendency to follow reason where it leads is strong, we are easily duped. The madness of pure reason is highly contagious: “But when a man’s fancy gets astride on his reason, when imagination is at cuffs with the senses, and common understanding as well as common sense, is kicked out of doors; the first proselyte he makes is himself, and when that is once compassed the difficulty is not so great in bringing over others, a strong delusion always operating from without as vigorously as from within.” (*A Tale of a Tub*, MW 143)

### 3. *Being Well Deceived*

So how do we avoid the specific kind of delusion that pure reason creates through its very unpollutedness, that is, in effect, its detachment from reality and the way we relate to it, namely not as pure minds, but as embodied, passionate and sense-bound beings? The answer that Swift gives us is that we can only do this by anchoring our reasoning firmly in lived experience. It is imperative, not only for our mental sanity, but also for our personal happiness, that we do not always try to get to the bottom of things, that we respect the face that the world shows us by treating the surfaces of things for as real and relevant as that which lies behind them and which reason (or its institutionalised form, science or natural philosophy) is eager to uncover. Happiness, writes Swift, is “a perpetual possession of being well deceived” (*A Tale of a Tub*, MW 144). Strephon, in *The Lady’s Dressing Room*, is a good example of a man whose refusal to be well-deceived destroys not only his happiness,

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<sup>7</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, London, Bombay, and Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1909, 129.

but indeed any chance for him to ever become happy again. When, driven by curiosity, he discovers his beloved Celia's humanity through the material traces of her natural bodily functions ("Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!") and then runs off in utter disgust, he is no less a fool than he was before, when he still thought of Celia as a "goddess" who was much too pure to have any bodily functions at all. From that moment on, his life is ruined because "his foul imagination links/ Each Dame he sees with all her stinks". He comes out of the experience thoroughly dissociated, very much like Gulliver who, after his fourth and last travel, finds it impossible to see his fellow humans, including his wife and children, as anything other than obnoxious Yahoos whom he can hardly bear to look at, let alone touch or be touched by. They are both fools who have fallen victim to their own unrealistic expectations. As Strephon wants his woman to be pure and free of anything that may indicate an animal nature (and thus ultimately her mortality), Gulliver wants the whole human race to be like the Houyhnhnms that he has come to admire so much (though rather uncritically). Both want their fellow humans to be something that they can never hope to be (nor should they). But do Strephon and Gulliver now at least *see* their fellow humans as what they *really* are? Yes and no. They see *part* of what we are. We certainly are smelly and dirty and have unsavoury habits, we have all the defects and vices of a Yahoo, and Brobdingnag's King may not have been entirely wrong when he concluded from Gulliver's descriptions that we may well be "the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth" (GT 123). However, that is not all we are. It merely describes one side of our nature. Strephon and Gulliver's mistake is that they now believe that what they have discovered about us is the *whole* truth. In fact, however, most people are still decent human beings and in many ways quite capable (and certainly more lovable than the dry and aloof Houyhnhnms), and Celia is still young and beautiful even if she is a bit messy in her habits and occasionally defecates, as the poem's narrator rightly points out: "When Celia in her glory shows,/ If Strephon would but stop his nose/ (...) / He soon would learn to think like me,/ And bless his ravished sight to see/ Such order from confusion sprung,/ Such gaudy tulips raised from dung." Beauty may be a surface phenomenon, but that doesn't make it any less real and in fact its existence even more wonderful. We'd be wise not to forget that, as Swift reminds us elsewhere: "In the proportion that credulity is a more peaceful possession of the mind than curiosity; so far preferable is that wisdom which converses about the surface, to that pretended philosophy which enters into the depth of things, and then comes gravely back with informations and discoveries that in the inside they are good for nothing. The two senses to which all objects first address themselves are the sight and the touch.



These never examine further than the colour, the shape, the size, and whatever other qualities dwell, or are drawn by art, upon the outward of bodies; and then comes reason officiously, with tools for cutting, and opening, and mangling, and piercing, offering to demonstrate that they are not of the same consistence quite through. Now I take all this to be the last degree of perverting Nature, one of whose eternal laws it is, to put her best furniture forward.” (*A Tale of a Tub*, MW 144-5)

Here reason suddenly appears as a destructive force, a regular torture master who cuts, and opens, and mangles, and pierces. Reason perverts nature like nothing else, by turning it inside-out. A proper translation of the Latin *perversum* is upside-down or topsy-turvy. Does this suggest that by refusing to let ourselves be governed by reason alone, we are not so topsy-turvy after all? It certainly seems so. We live in a world of outsides, of sight and touch, but reason tells us that none of this is real, that the inside, the hidden and invisible and intangible, is what is really real and what counts: molecules, and atoms, and electrons, genes and information, and just the facts, Ma'am. The outside is unreal and worthless. But all beauty resides in outsides, and our happiness depends on our ability to perceive beauty in the world. Moreover, there is no good reason to regard the hidden as more real than the apparent. The apparent need not be understood as the *merely* apparent. Strephon, in *The Lady's Dressing Room*, is not so much a naïve youth who is disgusted by a woman's physicality, but a philosopher who moves all the good furniture out of the way to discover, to his horror, that the room is empty and there is nothing left to sit on. The poem is not really about animal nature disgust at all, but about the horror of an empty world. And if it is reason that suggests this emptiness, then we are actually quite fortunate not to be very reasonable creatures after all. This holds especially for morality. We live in a world in which certain actions commend themselves, while others forbid themselves. In this world of outsides the good and the bad really exist. Oughts and ought-nots have a home in our experience. Yet if we are being completely reasonable, then we can easily see that nature knows no oughts, that the real world is just what it is, and nothing is inherently better than anything else. Except that *for us* it is. We cannot build a home in a world of pure reason. Or if we do, then we lose our home in the world we inhabit as the embodied, emotional and topsy-turvy creatures that we are. In other words, we lose our very humanity. The truly wise man, Swift informs us, “creams off Nature, leaving the sour and the dregs for philosophy and reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined point of felicity, called *the possession of being well deceived*, the serene peaceful state, of being a fool among knaves.” (*A Tale of a Tub*, MW 145)

*Bibliography:*

MW: Swift, Jonathan: *Major Works*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003.

GT: Swift, Jonathan: *Gulliver's Travels*, London: Penguin 2010.