

From Tolerance to Totalitarianism:
Modern Compassion's Relation to Western neo-Fascism

I present this paper today to reflect on an essential, not an accidental, relation between an increasingly growing contemporary understanding of the words “compassion” and “tolerance” and the increasing development of a Western totalitarianism and neo-Fascism.

When I refer to an increasingly growing contemporary understanding of the words “compassion” and “tolerance,” I am referring to a radical change in the traditional ways in which most Americans and Westerners understood these terms up until a few decades ago. Up to a few decades ago, if asked what these terms meant, I think that most Americans and Westerners would have identified “compassion” with empathy and “tolerance” with a property of justice that inclines a person to endure the existence of a smaller evil so as to prevent the existence of a greater evil.

Today in America and the West these terms tend to be conflated. Today, the contemporary conception (1) reduces the whole of justice to tolerance or compassion (which this conception often refers to simply as “social justice”); (2) understands tolerance and compassion to consist in psychological receptivity toward approving increasingly different kinds of personal and social human behavior; and (3) chiefly understands tolerance or compassion (and, with it, justice) to be a metaphysical, epistemological, historical, and hermeneutical (not a moral) principle: a tool for correctly reading history, rightly behaving morally and politically, and becoming and remaining scientific.

In classical thought, that of Aristotle, for example, all justice is “social,” and consists in being rightly ordered in our behavior toward others.¹ Within this context

reference to an act of “social justice” is redundant, displays an essential misunderstanding of justice’s nature.

Not so within the context of this new world order understanding that reduces justice to the Enlightenment understanding of “tolerance” or “compassion.” Within this context, the classical understanding of justice is not enlightened, not scientific, is socially and culturally backward. For these reasons, it is not real justice, not truly social.

Within the contemporary understanding of tolerance, compassion, or social justice, true justice does not chiefly refer to moral behavior in the classical philosophical sense. It refers chiefly to having the right political mindset, view of history, political feelings, political thoughts: to accepting the thoughts and feelings, or, as they like to call them, the “belief systems,” that, at any moment, promote the political agenda of contemporary Enlightenment intellectuals.

A main purpose of this paper is to propose a thesis that (1) this new understanding of tolerance is essentially socialistic, (2) socialism is no political aberration of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries or accidental accompaniment to the Enlightenment; (3) socialism and its new understanding of tolerance and justice are essential effects, necessary conditions for, the existence, development, and maintenance of Enlightenment notions of science and happiness that, since the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, have increasingly attempted to reduce all science to physical science and real happiness to being socialistic; and (4) essential to this “Enlightened” understanding of tolerance have been Enlightenment assumptions that no mysteries exist, no natures, or essences, exist in physical things, and that, outside of the method of Enlightened physical science, we cannot grasp the truth about anything.

Historically considered, I trace the origin of this new notion of tolerance to a reaction to the initial attempt of modern philosophy's father, René Descartes, to conceive of science as a system of clear and distinct ideas. Descartes had attempted to develop his new scientific system by claiming that true science is a body of knowledge, a system of clear and distinct ideas that God has buried in the human soul that, through his method, could be discovered by an exceptional person with a will powerful enough to view his ideas with pure reason. As such, Descartes considered science to be the achievement of a singular individual of exceptional will power.

Beyond this, as Étienne Gilson tells us, Descartes's grand project consisted in knowing everything by one method with the same amount of certainty or knowing nothing at all.² Descartes considered possessing truth and possessing science to be identical and, strictly speaking, to be an act of an individually strong will.³

Almost before it had begun, some Western intellectuals had started to realize that, at least in part, Descartes's project had been a failure. As part of his argument for soundness of his method, Descartes had claimed that only two substances exist, mind and matter, and that they cannot communicate or interact. Descartes considered matter to be essentially quantitative, pure extension, and totally inactive and mind, or spirit, to be totally unextended and the only thing that acts. In short, for Descartes the only real substance, nature, or essence that exists is mathematical substance and mathematics is the only real science.

While Rousseau admired Descartes and considered himself to live in the material world of Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton, where an essentially passive and inert matter coexists with motion, he recognized that, in the real world, matter and mind

communicate. Rousseau realized that the success of Descartes's dream to join all our ideas into a unified scientific body of knowledge depended upon overcoming Descartes's inability to explain how mind and matter interact.

Since Descartes could not explain this communication between the substances of mind, or spirit, and matter, Rousseau rejected Descartes's contention that God had given us this system simultaneously whole in a multitude of clear and distinct ideas buried in our mind. Instead, Rousseau maintained that no such system of clear and distinct ideas exists within the human spirit. Instead, under the influence of the "voice of conscience," or "tolerance," through progressive self-development (what we, today, call "progress"), Rousseau maintained that God has intended obscure human emotions to emerge from the human race into a scientific system of clear and distinct ideas.⁴

Rousseau contended that conscience is a way of speaking: an oracle, or voice, that moves us to project our emotions in increasingly unselfish ways across three stages of development: from a child of mechanical instinct, to being a moral agent, to becoming a fully social civic being. For Rousseau, knowledge, science, is simply the long-term result of projected emotion, or increasingly socialistic will to power. As he sees it, the voice of conscience is God's voice, free speech, an act of increasing states of tolerance or compassion whereby human nature emotionally emerges, or evolves, beyond a more primitive mechanical system of selfish individualism to an imperfectly social and moral stage, to, finally, a perfectly political social system of true science.

Rousseau realized that conscience in the proper sense cannot exist prior to the existence of knowledge and reason, the civic stage of complete Enlightenment. Where no truth exists, strictly speaking, no real conscience, or freedom, exists. Like Descartes,

Rousseau conflates truth and science and locates truth in an act of strong will, or emotion. For him, prior to the existence of real human science, no human truth exists. Hence, before humanity reaches its final stage of total social inclusion, a kind of totalitarian or collectivist civil will, Rousseau holds that what we call “conscience” is a primitive, mechanical-like groping toward the human good and no true freedom exists. Only the enlightened system of ideas, that is, global socialism, can make conscience emerge because non-enlightened ideas (1) are obscure and indistinct feelings and (2) cannot produce audible sound. Rousseau maintains that they generate the counterfeit noise of fanatics. Hence, prior to the Enlightenment, conscience and true freedom had no voice, strictly speaking human beings are not scientific, not free, and no true, or social, justice can exist.

In short, Rousseau reduces all human knowledge to what, today, many Americans call collectivist “belief systems.” For him science is simply an enlightened belief system, a belief system that has purged itself of emotional backwardness by becoming increasingly inclusive, increasingly, or globally, socialistic. For Rousseau, developing science as a system of clear and distinct ideas is the end of human nature, human history, and comprises the nature of human happiness.

Rousseau uses the idea of tolerance to transform the classical notion of justice into an epistemological tool, an intellectual device, serving a political project: to effect a state of higher metaphysical and historical consciousness, a state of Enlightened socialist feeling and Enlightened reading of history. In our time, in some quarters, this Enlightened socialist feeling appears to be increasingly identified with true science and appears to be generating a global fascist state to realize its existence.

Like Descartes before him, Rousseau was unable rationally to justify Descartes's claims about modern and Enlightenment reduction of science and truth about reality to mathematical physics. Apart from the claim that some, higher, more inclusive social feeling, a kind of socialist general will shared by "tolerant" people, collectively establishes truth, it has no criterion of truth. Rousseau knew this. In his hands, science, philosophy, became reduced to being in the right historical state of mind, having the right feelings about accepting any and all differences that Enlightened intellectuals at any time collectively dictate. Hence, today, Enlightened socialists tend to brand anyone who disagrees with this utopian fairy tale, who rejects this view of science and history, backward, mean, bigoted.

For our purposes, we need to understand that the metaphysical principles that underlie the contemporary Western understanding of tolerance and science are not philosophical and are enemies of individual human freedom. They are chiefly ideological, propagandistic, derived from Rousseau's utopian dream of human nature, science, and happiness. Moreover, we need to understand that our contemporary Western educational institutions and the socialist political regimes that give birth to and support these institutions are not historical aberrations. They are necessary effects of the application to the practical order of Enlightenment principles about the nature of philosophy and science, of the political attempt to reduce the whole of knowledge to mathematical physics. Logical application of these Enlightenment principles generated our modern public and private schools and universities and Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and other forms of contemporary socialism.

In short, mainly under the influence of Rousseau's and Descartes's disordered

notions of science, the Enlightenment project unwittingly gave birth to educational institutions that are essentially socialistic forms of propaganda and secularized fundamentalism. These arose as the necessary means for engendering a poetic, metaphysical myth that the whole of science is contained in modern physics, which only the mathematical physicist can read.

The reason why this tended to happen is clear. Under the influence of Descartes, Rousseau, and their progeny, modern physical science sought to be intellectually all-consuming, to be the only form of human learning, of human truth. No rational argument can justify this quest. So, the modern scientific spirit turned to poetic myth, sophistry, and fundamentalistic spirituality to create the arguments it needs rationally to justify its all-consuming nature. In practical terms, this means that, if universities are primarily institutes of higher education, and metaphysics is the highest form of natural human education, the modern scientific spirit necessarily inclined Western intellectuals to create propaganda institutes, and political regimes that support the existence of such institutes, to justify modern science's claim that it is the only form of human knowledge..

Most critics today correctly call these neo-gnostic religious principles "secular humanism." They wrongly call them a "philosophy." Educationally, under the influence of Rousseau, these principles maintain that all learning is revelation, a revelation of the something they call the "human spirit." By "human spirit" they do not mean some sort of irrepressible emotion to greatness within the soul of every individual. They mean some sort of universal scientific spirit (the spirit of progress, of true human freedom, of the human project) that grows by first revealing itself in forms of backward Scriptural writings and organized religious practices. This is the same sort of universal, anti-

Catholic, anti-Semitic spirit that was a main cause of the development of Fascism, Nazism, and Marxism.

To help us grow beyond these backward forms of religious understanding, Enlightened intellectuals think they must encourage students to question parental authority and must attack religious traditions as backward. They commonly call this attack against authority “tolerance” and “questioning belief systems.” For such people, metaphysics is the epic poetic story of the evolution, or emergence, of human consciousness, the universal human spirit, from backward states of selfishness and primitive religions like Judaism and Catholicism to that of a new political world order dominated by Enlightened systematic science and the religion of love of humanity. And tolerance is this mythical history’s chief engine of progress, story-telling, and means of reading history.

The means of such emergence consists of a synthesis of what Rousseau calls the “voice of conscience” and poetic enthusiasm, or, more simply, “tolerance,” an increasingly inclusive socialist feeling for love of humanity, an increasing willingness to incorporate all human differences into a higher state of socialist political consciousness as a means for achieving the political goal of world socialism: for everyone to think the

Put simply, my thesis is that all Enlightenment thinkers are skeptics, socialists, and enemies of individual human freedom. They tend to be secularized Lutheran and Calvinist intellectuals who, like many Protestant thinkers, distrust theoretical reason. By denying the reality of natures, or essences, in things, they must deny that truth in the human intellect must conform to a mind-independent measure in physical being. Since the opposite of truth is twofold (a falsehood or a lie), thinkers who deny that physical

things measure truth in the human intellect tend to become utopians, have trouble staying in touch with reality. And, like many politicians, they incline not to think they can lie. After all, how can a person lie if mind-independent things have no intrinsic principle of self-identity?

Such people tend to think that truth statements are simply commonly accepted emotive claims, statements of commonly received passionate practical agreement. This explains how so many contemporary socialists can be blatant liars, as most ordinary people understand lying, and not be disturbed by such behavior; not even think they lie. The reason is that the natural inclination of such sophists is that, having divorced truth from an intellectual relation with reality, they tend to maintain that truth is a collectivist practical feeling, something socially imposed by a collective act of will, which they tend to reduce to an of emotion, “sincere feeling.”

Truth, as such people understand it, is simply an Enlightened social feeling, a passionate emotion, that agrees with the same sort of passionate social feeling that people like them (sincere, tolerant people) tend to feel. Falsehood and lying, in turn, are simply forms of un-Enlightened social feeling, insincerity, intolerance, cultural backwardness, meanness: the sort of feelings classical philosophers, Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and greedy capitalists and selfish individualists tend to have.

I maintain that the propagandistic nature of our contemporary Western educational institutions and the socialist political regimes that helped give birth to, and support, them are not historical aberrations. They are necessary effects of the application to the practical order of fallacious Enlightenment principles like those of Rousseau about the nature of philosophy, science, and happiness. Logical application of these Enlightenment principles

unwittingly generated attitudes that dominate in modern mass media and in our modern public and private schools and universities and also generated Fascism, Nazism, Communism, and other forms of contemporary socialism.

In short, mainly under the influence of Rousseau, the Enlightenment project unwittingly gave birth to ways of thinking and educational and political institutions that are necessary means for engendering and sustaining the utopian, metaphysical myth that the whole of science is contained in modern physics, which only the mathematical physicist can rightly interpret, and that only modern science can generate happiness.

The classical liberal arts, the classical understanding of philosophy, justice, and tolerance, individual liberty, and republican government are unsuitable handmaidens for generating, sustaining, and growing these myths. Hence, increasingly in our time, we see contemporary Enlightenment intellectuals agitating at universities to replace the traditional liberal arts and philosophy with courses in social science, sensitivity training, and social justice; and, in the political, realm to replace national sovereignty with global government, a neo-Fascist state.

Those who oppose the latter development often do not recognize its essential connection to the Enlightenment reduction of the whole of truth and science to contemporary physical science. Indeed, they often embrace this reductionism while opposing its essential political outcomes. Unhappily, in reality, this is not possible. It violates the metaphysical principle of *agere sequitur esse* (the way things act follows from the way they exist).

In conclusion, in this short paper, I hope I have been able to convince my listeners of the dangers of this scientific reductionism, and that you will join me in opposing it.

Peter A. Redpath

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NOTES

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 5.

² Étienne Gilson. *Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 140.

³ Peter A. Redpath, , *Cartesian Nightmare: An Introduction to Transcendental Sophistry* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B. V., 1997), pp. 51–132.

⁴ Peter A. Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B.V., 1998), pp. 72–73. See, also, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans Allan Bloom (New York, Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1979), pp. 285–287.