

Dr. Addington

Long Essay

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Reason's Power and Lack ThereofReason as Described in the Eighteenth Century

In 1695, when printers were still constrained by laws, there were only twenty publishing houses in all of England. Just over 65 years later, there were nearly ten times that amount to be found all over the country. During the eighteenth century, print culture proliferated, and, with this, secular culture in writing became much more popular as well. During this time period, many pieces of literature were released displaying different opinions on reason and its role in human perception and action. While Adam in *Paradise Lost* argues that reason's intent is to follow God and intentionally avoid sin, I argue in favor of philosopher David Hume's idea: Reason has limited power based on passion, but the idea of reason in itself is largely based on personal identity. Readings of other texts from this time period, such as *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Gulliver's Travels* further attest to Hume's argument, emphasizing the true role that reason takes during this changing and defining time period.

We can first begin to analyze this view of reason by studying ideas from John Locke, specifically from his piece *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke and Hume had very similar ideas, both being remembered for their secular ideas that were abstract and new to their time period; however, Locke was known for his more literal and concrete ideas of what reason could be. Near the beginning of his essay, Locke opens up with, "Thus he who has raised himself above the alms-basket, and, not content to live lazily on scraps of begged opinions, sets his own thoughts on work to find and follow truth, will (whatever he lights on) not miss the hunter's satisfaction" (106). Immediately upon beginning the passage, it is made clear what point

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Locke is trying to get across: Reason is logic, facts, and things that can be seen with the searcher's own eyes. Innate beliefs, specifically religion, are seen merely as opinions in Locke's position, and he views those who use true reason in their everyday life as superior to those who do not. This strong view of reason demonstrates the primary idea that it is much more secular than previous social norms would have implied. Reason is something that you must develop for yourself, and it is not something that can be handed to you as a secondhand opinion. Locke primarily states that those who seek knowledge for themselves will then be able to use reason throughout the entirety of their lives, allowing them to find their own personal identity.

Furthermore, Locke continuously addresses the fact that reason is a completely individually based concept that varies from person to person. He even goes as far as to doubt his own knowledge, saying, "For, though it be certain that there is nothing in this treatise of truth whereof I am not fully persuaded, yet I consider myself as liable to mistakes as I can think thee; and know that this book must stand or fall with thee, thou art not to blame me for it" (106). This examines the individualism of reason and how it can change based on each person and what they find to be true or untrue. Anybody can make careless, "lazy" assumptions; however, if one genuinely searches for explanations and information to further educate themselves and broaden their ability to use reason in their everyday lives, that is information that they are driven to find on their own. With that being said, it is more than likely that not every person will find the same information, for this craving for education is driven by passion.

Looking deeper into Locke's ideals in regard to reason, he also acknowledges the complexity and variation of reason. He later writes, "I know there are not words enough in any

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language to answer all the variety of ideas that enter into men's discourses and reasonings" (109). The complexity of reason is beyond comprehension, and Locke understands that each person's individual views of true reason may vary widely. There is no single definition for reason: Based on what truths each individual is seeking, reason can be anywhere from divine to purely evil. If one is searching for certain answers, they can use what they find in their own lives to drive themselves towards their passions by using the information that they have discovered. Locke's primary concern is that one cannot find or claim to have reason without their own individual grasp on the concept. Reason is extremely complex, and no two people will have the exact same explanations of their own individual reasoning.

Moving away from Locke's straightforward discussion on reason and what it means specifically, one can analyze Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* to see these ideas of reason play out through the format of a story. Specifically in part four, the speaker is asked, "Therefore he desired to be farther satisfied what I meant by law, and the dispensers thereof, according to the present practice in my own country; because he thought Nature and Reason were sufficient guides for a reasonable animal, as we pretended to be, in showing us what we ought to do, and what to avoid" (424). In part four of the story, the speaker is stranded on an island and left to learn the culture of the Houyhnhnm as it compares to his culture, or the culture of the Yahoo. Over time, the speaker grows to truly admire the way that the Houyhnhnms live their lives, specifically how they are based on reason and reason alone. When the speaker explains the law, including everything from the reasons for war to the English Constitution. His master, a Houyhnhnm, commands him to silence, for he is in utter disbelief at the situation that is being

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explained by this Yahoo. This is one of many times where the speaker begins to idolize the idea of reasoning and logic over law and the other ways of life used in England; however, because of the complexity of humans (or Yahoos in this case), it is not entirely that simple. Going back to a part of Hume's original point regarding reason, he emphasizes limitations that can be caused by passion. This explains a large part of the Yahoo's inability to strictly adhere to reason: Humans have been going to war and breaking laws for centuries due to their passions, which are much stronger than the Houyhnhnms are able to experience. Reason is displayed as an ideal way of life in the text; however, it is made clear that it is unachievable by humans due to their complexity and wide variety of passions.

When the Master Houyhnhnm further explains their use of reason in their everyday lives, he explains a truly detached way of life that clearly differs from that of the Yahoos. The speaker explains, "They have no fondness for their colts or foals; but the care they take in educating them proceedeth entirely from the dictates of reason" (436). One key aspect of human life is displayed as far back as the Old Testament, and that is passion in love for other people as well as one's children. Generally speaking, based on what we have learned from centuries of human development, a majority of parents would not raise their children in the way that the Houyhnhnms raise theirs. Although their masterful ways of breeding, educating, and regulating baby Houyhnhnms are very well within the definition of reason, Hume's exception of passion is clearly in effect here, for many human parents would not be capable of completely detaching themselves from their children. Even before the children enter the picture, the Houyhnhnms do not reproduce based on love, but on characteristics. Again, although this is extremely reasonable

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and healthy for the overall wellness of the population, love and passion for one another is a definitive trait of the human race. The reason that the Houyhnhnms display here is incredible in theory, but human passion far precedes the desire for reason in this context.

Finally, when the speaker closes out the fourth part of his story with the Houyhnhnms, he seems to worship the ways that they have based their lives in nearly every aspect. He pines for this way of life for the Yahoos back home, saying, “But the Houyhnhnms, who live under the government of reason, are no more proud of the good qualities they possess, than I should be for not wanting a leg or an arm, which no man in his wits would boast of, although he must be miserable without them” (454). After experiencing this simplified way of life, the speaker sees the way that he has been living as miserable, and he feels as though the Yahoos back home should adopt this form of living. This is further exemplified when he returns home and is completely appalled by his wife and the others around him. He spends most of his time in the stables with his new horses, and he refuses to allow himself to even experience the revolting stench of the humans around him. After living a life with reason, he puts it on a pedestal above other ways of living, specifically the common culture of England during this time period. With that being said, it is important to remember that a life of reason is nearly impossible for humans to reach: Passion will overrule reason, but the Houyhnhnms live a very simple life with very simple minds. They are capable of overruling passion due to their lack thereof. The speaker idolizes the Houyhnhnms lifestyle based around reason, but it is not a lifestyle that is reasonable or plausible for humans to replicate.

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As I have shown through in-depth readings and analysis, reason can be understood during the eighteenth century as an ideal that is based on personal identity, and it can easily be overruled by passion. As explained through the story in *Gulliver's Travels*, living a life based on reason and truth is an excellent and logical idea in theory; however, passion will take control over reason at some point, and this reason varies wildly from person to person. Although some may argue that, with enough mind training and strength, reason is capable of overruling passion, this can be proven false back as far as Adam and Eve's time. Satan, disguised as a serpent, told Eve that eating the fruit would give her knowledge, and, as Locke discussed in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, her search for knowledge overruled what she had been told to believe. God told Eve that she shouldn't eat the fruit; however, He did not give an explanation as to why or what would happen if she did. The original sin was caused due to this definition of reason, which further proves the portrayal of reason during the eighteenth century, as well as today.

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#### Works Cited

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