

DOCTORAL THESIS

The doubting dean Jonathan Swift's Critique of reason in the age of enlightenment

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Abstract

By drawing on the two waves of critique of the Enlightenment and its version of reason—one after the French Revolution and the other after WWII—this research pushes the timeline to an even earlier point and tries to study the critique of the Enlightenment and its version of reason within the Enlightenment itself. In doing so it chooses the English/Irish writer Jonathan Swift for case study, because in his works he repeatedly levels scathing criticisms of his age and the reason upheld by many of his contemporaries.

In his critique of the Enlightenment and its version of reason Swift appeals to a long tradition in Western intellectual history which regards human reason as twofold: a discursive part which proceeds in a step-by-step manner, through analysis, calculation, and demonstration; and an intuitive part which reaches the conclusion directly, immediately, and with much certainty. The Enlightenment, however, breaks the balance between the two by promoting discursive reason and eliminating intuitive reason. As a result, discursive reason is easily instrumentalized without the check of intuitive reason, which is thrown into oblivion.

Swift's critique is essentially a protest against this trend that was going on at his time. In contrast to it, he denounces discursive reason while champions intuitive reason. In his critique, the main target is discursive reason, and it necessarily also involves the most representative embodiment of discursive reason that was prospering at the time, namely, natural science. The critique of discursive reason and of science is made partly by relying on intuitive reason, which makes it, in a sense, also reason's critique of itself.

Of course, Swift does not regard human reason, either intuitive or discursive, as the panacea for human beings. As a priest of the Anglican Church, he thinks reason should always be subordinate to faith—in other words, reason is limited. But perhaps ironically, in his emphasis on the limit of reason and the consequent need for faith as embodied and ensured in an authoritative institution, Swift reveals his own bigotry, intolerance and authoritarianism, which shows how he was historically and ideologically limited.

Despite his historical and ideological limit, Swift's critique of reason is still of relevance and value to us today. As a Counter-Enlightenment thinker within the Enlightenment, he exposes for us another aspect of reason which is usually ignored today, and consequently helps to deepen our understanding not only of the Enlightenment, but also of enlightenment itself and the contemporary world we are still living in.

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