

# A Critique of Unaided Reason

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Rationalist thought has discredited Christianity over the last few hundred years, questioning its capacity and integrity. Rationalists, past and present, often object that doctrines such as the Trinity fail to meet the standards of human reason. Others, such as the Higher Critics, challenge the infallibility of the Bible—claiming that Scripture embodies both God’s decrees and fallible human words. However, modern thinkers rarely contest their trust in unaided human reason. When they have challenged unaided human reason, they typically address secondary issues. Yet, is it reasonable to trust unaided human reason alone? Americans in our era revere unaided human reason, and this question seems absurd to us—but it *is* worth asking.

Two primary streams of thought have shaped the Western intellect over the last 2500 years: human philosophy and Christianity. Philosophical thought or Unaided Reason developed among the ancient Greeks about 500 to 600 BC; it dominated Western thought throughout the rest of the Ancient era. Christian thought or Aided Reason penetrated the West during the latter part of the Ancient era, becoming dominant around 500 AD. Christianity governed thought during the Middle Ages, retaining this preeminence through the Protestant Reformation. Greek philosophy or Unaided Reason reentered Western thought during the Renaissance, gained momentum, and emerged as a serious challenger to Christianity or Aided Reason in the Eighteenth century. Unaided Reason eventually triumphed over Aided Reason, and has governed thought to this day.

These systems overlap; human philosophy often recognizes concepts such as God and the Natural Law, while Christianity recognizes some utility in human reason. Nevertheless, each system emphasizes distinct dogmas that sever any possible reconciliation. Christianity or Aided Reason depends on its understanding of God as the infinite Being who superintends the creation, the One giving birth to all existence and purpose. Man wallows hopelessly in sin; this warps our intellectual capacity. God mercifully gave us His revelation in the Bible, which serves as the ultimate fount of wisdom; without it, reason is lost. By contrast, Unaided Reason relies on human intellect—our ideas decide existence and purpose, and these ideas rely on our perception of reality. For example, we decide the existence or nonexistence of God or gods along with His or their character or nature; we determine the character and purpose of man and his institutions. Consequently, Unaided Reason is subject to the pitfalls of our humanity.

Philosophical and Christian thought have shared ideas, for instance, the Natural Law or the Light of Nature. Some branches of human philosophy observe a shared morality among men that transcends time and culture. The Bible speaking of the Gentiles, notes that, “[t]hey show that the work of the law is written on their hearts...”<sup>1</sup>. Both concur that man experiences a common morality, while differing sometimes on its source and always on its purpose.<sup>2</sup> In other instances, they borrow from each other. Deism appropriated some ideas of a Creator-God from Christianity, but molded these into concepts that sharply diverge from Christianity. Likewise, Christianity borrowed philosophy’s mathematical or scientific approach to reason—for example, applying the syllogism to theology.<sup>3</sup>

Unaided Reason competes with Biblically Aided Reason in Western thought. Summarizing Unaided Reason is nearly impossible. Its discordant approaches have spawned diverse schools of thought with names such as Rationalism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Nihilism, and Existentialism. Notwithstanding, Unaided Reason betrays at least two attributes in all its many manifestations. First, it rests solely on the use of unaided human reason. Second, Unaided Reason presupposes a high view of man and a correspondingly low view of God. Philosophers rarely consider or discuss this dependence. Let us discuss this dependence that they largely ignore; let us review first the basic views of man relating to good and evil, before analyzing this dependence on a high view of man and a low view of God.

Christian thought on this subject provides the best explanation of man’s relationship to good and evil. Sin and salvation lie at the heart of the Gospel<sup>4</sup>, and this fundamental teaching has been approached in three ways: Augustinianism, Semi-pelagianism, and Pelagianism. These ideas tangle with very complex doctrine. For our purpose, a broad discussion of core propositions will suffice. In general, Augustinianism views man as helplessly engulfed in sin, so wretched that only God’s grace can save him. Pelagianism in its broadest sense considers man as good by nature or a “blank slate”—man turns to God through his own exertion, moving from sin to good. Semi-pelagianism stands between these positions. Goodness and sin coexist in man’s nature, and salvation demands a combination of God’s grace and man’s effort, God and man are co-workers in salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 2:15

<sup>2</sup> Christianity proclaims that the aim of God’s law is to prod us to Jesus Christ (Romans 7:7-8:1), while human philosophy finds other purposes in the Natural Law. Moreover, some philosophical systems disagree concerning the existence of the Natural Law—Postmodernism often asserts that morality and ethics reflect culturally infused ideas that are specific to a time and place.

<sup>3</sup> Scholasticism contaminated Roman Catholicism in the latter Middle Ages, and Reformed thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries. In both cases, Christian thought ossified by searching out obscure truth, leaving behind the heart of the Gospel. The outcome is not surprising in light of the intrinsic disparity—Christian scholastic thought became wedded to establishing the truth of the Bible using reason instead of establishing reason using the truth of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> R. B Griddlestone, “Sin, and its Punishment” in *The Classic Bible Dictionary*, Jay P. Green, Sr., Ed (Lafayette, Indiana, Sovereign Grace Trust Fund, 1988), 1019-1023.

Human philosophy or Unaided Reason rests by default on a Pelagian view of man. Unaided Reason torn by sin is wholly unreliable—this rules out either Augustinianism or Semi-pelagianism, which both admit to man’s sinfulness. This understanding is crucial—Unaided Reason intrinsically destroys its own capacity when it admits to the pessimistic view of man as sinful. Thus, we may deduce that Unaided Reason by default consents to a high view of man as good, over against a low view that regards him as sinful. This view, however, must explain the evil that is rampant among us. The high view argues that our civilization or other external factors corrupt our good nature. These factors range from upbringing, education, neighborhood, Democrats, Republicans, or any other social factor imaginable.<sup>5</sup> Unaided Reason’s implicit reliance on Pelagianism begs a question: is such a high view of man warranted? Let us now focus on some of the objections raised against Pelagianism, using the tools of Unaided Reason to guide our discussion.

Pelagianism’s explanation of the origins of evil raises as many questions as it answers. If we are good, how could evil find its way into our civilization? In attempting to resolve this question, Pelagianism inevitably devolves into surreal logic, offering such contradictions as good men corrupting the institutions of civilization, or good men embracing corrupt institutions. It never coherently spells out why good men would embrace evil.<sup>6</sup> This objection alone is enough to condemn Pelagianism as a plausible intellectual system.

In a like manner, Pelagianism disintegrates when we compare reality to predicted results. If evil resides within our civilization or somewhere outside of our humanity, we can easily overcome evil by unearthing the corruption and applying a suitable remedy—an approach that we previously attempted. During the first half of the nineteenth century, many Americans believed in perfecting society through moral transformation, favoring Christian revivalism to accomplish these ends.<sup>7</sup> In the years that followed, America strove to reform social institutions with the hope of solving man’s problems.<sup>8</sup> Despite these efforts, bloody war prevailed, poverty proved intractable, and government corruption recurred with painful frequency. The problems of the human condition abide in defiance of our persistent efforts, contrary to the implicit and explicit promises of Pelagian thought. Likewise, Man’s conscience, the universal capacity for judging good and evil bewilders Pelagianism. If good men judge the behaviors, motives, and attitudes of others as evil, why would they engage in a similar behavior? We often do the very things that we criticize in others. Pelagianism by blaming a good man’s knowingly evil actions on civilization or other external causes offers a feeble solution to evil. Pelagian ideas also present a confusing view of the social controls relied on by all cultures; to wit,

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<sup>5</sup> Despite a self-evident contradiction, some notable Philosophers, such as Benedictus Spinoza, have naively held a pessimistic view of man. See Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1926), 209-210

<sup>6</sup> Those who protest that the Bible suffers from a similar enigma neglect the Bible’s basic premise; God reveals to us the origins of evil (Genesis 3:1-19). An explanation is not imperative—human reason relies on the Bible in contrast to the Bible depending on human reason.

<sup>7</sup> Russel B. Nye, *Society and Culture in America*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1974), 34 ff, and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1980), 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 50-51, and Page Smith, *The Rise of Industrial America* (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), 909-911.

civilization requires far-reaching restraints to govern the damage brought about by its own corruption of our good nature.

Good men applying reason should ultimately reach agreement with each other in a Pelagian world. But three to four hundred years of intellectual history repudiates this—some Rationalists believe in God, others deny His existence, and still others are agnostic. Some are optimistic about man, while others hold more pessimistic views. Some focus on emotions and intuition, while others emphasize reason, and still others the will. Outside of philosophy, similar disparities turn up. Economics diverges into many different schools, such as Keynesian, Supply-side, and Marxist. We find that, contrary to expectations, Unaided Reason fluctuates wildly in its conclusions—leading us to deduce that either man is sinful, or so thoroughly corrupted by his civilization that he is past redemption.

The previous discussion exposes part of the bewildering and paradoxical nature of Pelagian ideas; these contradictions, alone, discredit the doctrine of Unaided Reason. Our finitude merely compounds this confusion. Many Rationalists allege that man can discover ultimate truth using Unaided Reason, but the speculation of Martin Hiedegger, Postmodernists, and similar contemporary thinkers challenge this claim. Rationalism's divergent results confound many intellectuals, and they struggle to account for this. Their copious polemics boil down to this: man cannot discover truth using Unaided Reason because he is finite. This simple and direct statement lights an explosive charge under the doctrine of Unaided Reason. Bereft of absolute truth, Unaided Reason withers; incapable of ordaining purpose and meaning, stymied by the basic human yearnings for ultimate meaning.

Death is another obstacle for Unaided Reason. Our current dependence on Unaided Reason accentuates the here and now, whereas the Bible seamlessly integrates death into its doctrines with its stress on the hereafter. Unaided Reason ignores death. Death eludes the grasp of Unaided Reason—our fate after death is beyond our understanding; we lack concrete information about it. Thus, Unaided Reason must draw upon either conjecture or mysticism. Anyone insisting that there is nothing beyond the grave engages in mere speculation—they stand in need of solid facts. When Unaided Reason posits a hereafter, it takes a mystical flight that threatens its “rational” methodology. Unaided Reason might safely ignore the problem, if expiring was a mere trifle—but death sets the boundaries of life. Death renders meaningless our success and failure, love and hate, wealth and poverty—all we have or do. Death is our ultimate destiny, and that destiny plays a tangible role in defining life's purpose and meaning—yet, death confounds Unaided Reason.

Herein, Unaided Reason confronts serious objections. These objections are reached by using the tools of Unaided Reason, without resorting to the tool of Aided Reason, the Bible. Unaided Reason cannot withstand the scrutiny of Unaided Reason; it is self-consuming. Unfortunately, human philosophers have either disregarded or dismissed their problems with Pelagianism, finitude, and death, touting their system as preeminent. The Bible and Aided Reason roundly rejects Pelagianism. During the fifth and sixth

centuries, Christianity condemned Pelagianism as heresy<sup>9</sup> because Scripture repeatedly characterizes man as hopelessly lost in sin<sup>10</sup>. Thus those “Christians” embracing Pelagian doctrine must dismiss Scripture as fallible and creeds as obsolete documents without modern relevance. Liberal Christianity in this age largely adheres to Pelagianism. Historically, it roots itself in Unaided Reason using tools such as evolutionary naturalism and higher criticism<sup>11</sup>—raising the question: is Liberal Christianity truly Christian? Contemporary thinkers such as the Postmodernists generally admit that Unaided Reason has shortcomings, but they question Unaided Reason using Unaided Reason.

The Western World faces a grave problem in the failures of Unaided Reason. The knowledge used by each of us in understanding and living in this world is passed on to us; the current knowledge base rests on Unaided Reason. Returning to our original question: Is the system bequeathed to us reliable? Can we trust Unaided Reason?

Unaided Reason directs the Western mind with disastrous results. For instance, Unaided Reason struggles to establish ethics or morality. Both ancient and modern Rationalists trust the Natural Law as a moral compass—the Natural Law is an observed morality shared by men, transcending time and culture. In their minds, either the Creator fixed morality, or we derive it from the principles inherent in our nature. The meaning is clear: our shared morality depends on Unaided Reason, and is thus subject to Unaided Reason’s poverty. Earlier we examined the divergence in thought that resulted from Unaided Reason; this division mirrors the ethical rift in American culture. Until recently, Unaided Reason escaped the consequences of this divergence, primarily because of our heritage—Christian ethics fixed cultural ethics long before the rise of Rationalism. Predictably, when Rationalism examined cultural ethics, it encountered a fixed morality in the Natural Law that coincided with Christian ethics. Christianity had deeply penetrated Western culture; its ethics persisted even when faced with a hostile intellect. The Rationalists borrowed ethical capital from Christianity, but this dissolved during the twentieth century. Unaided Reason, forced to lean on its own resources, began an ethical collapse. We witness the Postmodernists and Existentialists who now hypothesize that culture propels ethics, because absolute truth cannot be known. In these ideologies, the Rationalist encounters an opponent that is also founded on Unaided Reason who discount the universality of the Natural Law. Thus, with Unaided Reason as our primary thought motif, our current ethical conflict was inevitable—a natural consequence of Unaided Reason’s divergence.

Unaided Reason paved the way to excessive individualism with the accompanying hedonistic excesses. Unaided Reason must look inward to resolve truth, even the “truth” that there is no truth—and such self-dependence excites excessive individualism and hedonism. Previously, Christian ethic kept these tendencies at bay. Americans now labor

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<sup>9</sup> Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 138

<sup>10</sup> The Bible dwells ceaselessly on sin, but specifically discusses our through corruption in, for example, Genesis 6:5, Job 15:14-16, Jeremiah 17:9, Psalm 14:1-4, Proverbs 20:9, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Ecclesiastes 9:3, Romans 3:10-18, Romans 3:23, Ephesians 2:1-3, 1 John 1:8, 10

<sup>11</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 25-26

to think corporately. Some wind up completely self-absorbed, while others lurch into an apathetic neglect of corporate obligations. Pelagian ideas of human goodness also foster this individualism. As good individuals, we each deserve good things. This combination of self-absorption and a Pelagian sense of entitlement gives us our ironclad faith in the ultimate self-pursuit—happiness. Our unending quest for wealth, sexual satisfaction, self-adulation, and self-indulgence bears witness to the centrality of happiness in our culture. Our heroes are the politically powerful, actors, singers, and the wealthy—rarely do we esteem the ethical, the pious, or the brave. Our democracy considers the Declaration of Independence our seminal document, and this asserts that the pursuit of happiness is an unalienable right. We may regard happiness as man’s natural pursuit, but others have believed and believe today that “[m]an’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully enjoy him forever.”<sup>12</sup>

The products of Unaided Reason are so numerous as to render a brief discussion impossible. However, we may add a few additional examples. Subjectivity increasingly trumps objectivity as feelings and intuition dictate truth. Why? Postmodernism, Existentialism, and similar ideologies that either deny or question truth coupled with Unaided Reason produce an irrational reason. Furthermore, God becomes a product of our imagination or desires because Unaided Reason precludes submitting to an outside authority such as the Bible. The effects are innumerable; in a bizarre twist, Unaided Reason, which vowed to rescue us from superstition, has instead bound us to a self-faith that defies reason.

Modern thought has vilified Christianity as an enemy of reason, a medieval religion that reeks of age. Both charges are ludicrous. As this essay has argued, Unaided Reason fails when tested against its own principles. Its faulty logic and contradictions obscure understanding; it rebels against reason. Unaided Reason originated with the ancient Greeks—this ancient retreat merely masquerades as progressive thought. In our day, Unaided Reason is giving way under the weight of its infirmities and self-inflicted wounds; its time has passed. Aided Reason must rescue modern thought or it will succumb to absurdity. We find the true fulfillment of Aided Reason in Augustinianism’s total reliance on God. By contrast, Pelagianism and Semi-pelagianism both trust to man in whole or part. Unfortunately, over the last few hundred years Augustinianism has ceded the intellectual field, as it strove to preserve its theological foundation against attacks from both Human Philosophy and Semi-pelagianism. The time is now ripe for Augustinianism. It can speak authoritatively not only about religion, but also all fields of thought—it is comfortable with theology, economics, government and politics, etc. Regaining this territory is the challenge before us.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Westminster Standards*, 35