

Arationality as a Contemporary Behavioral Norm

by JOHN A. HAMMES

Commentators have been noticing for years the increasing hedonism of our times. The interpretations of the causes and effects of such a departure from Christianity have been varied, and there is no doubt that the subject can be analyzed from many standpoints: philosophical, theological, even economic. A particularly fruitful approach is to examine with John A. Hammes the psychological roots of hedonism. Identifying in hedonism the crucial rejection of the rational in favor of mere feelings, Hammes goes on to make important distinctions as to how man functions at the spiritual, intellectual and emotional levels. Only when the levels function in the right order, suggests the author, can we even begin to construct a framework of values for modern life which meets the demands of Christ.

Hedonism as a way of life is not new. Aristippus of Cyrene (435-355 B.C.) and his followers equated pleasure with happiness, and considered feeling the only valid criterion of truth.¹ Later, Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) contended the morally right action to be that which produces the most pleasure. In early nineteenth century philosophy, Jeremy Bentham claimed pleasure to be the criterion of right conduct, a point of view labeled by his critics a “pig philosophy.”² Today, hedonism has again emerged as an expression of the atheistic humanism which dominates contemporary society. Sexual permissiveness (once termed promiscuity) and drug abuse abound. Bodily awareness has largely replaced intellectual awareness. A new commandment has been given unto us, and it is the worship of the uninhibited self.³ It is the age of passion, feeling and sensualism. In Freudian terms, it might well be described as the “Age of the Id.”⁴

The rise of affective hedonism is correlated with the rejection of reason. The conflict has been variously described as one between the rational and the irrational,⁵ the cerebral and the emotional, the conscious and the intuitive, the empirical and the rhapsodic,⁶ the Apollonians and the Dionysians.⁷

Whence came this conflict? It is as old as man himself, but the contemporary scene has its own unique factors. One popular explanation for the present-day emphasis on feeling and emotional immediacy is given in terms of a revolt against the dehumanization and depersonalization attributed to the growth of technology. Another hypothesis sees the emergence of arationality as consequential to the suppression of that human dimension by an over-emphasis, in previous decades, on the rational aspect of man.⁸ The interest in the affective dimension can also be seen in terms of an alienation hypothesis, such that the lack of warmth and community in interpersonal relationships has led to the proliferation of so-called encounter and growth groups.⁹ Then, too, the contemporary breakdown in traditional religious values, the loss of the sense of the absolute, and the rise of atheistic humanism have all contributed to an arational subjectivism and the preference for the law of the flesh over the law of the spirit (see Romans 7:14-23).

The advocates of the affective-intuitionistic-feeling emphasis are sincere in their efforts to oppose the depersonalization and dehumanization of man in a computerized, mechanistic age. Indeed, the counter culture can be seen as an understandable revolt against such depersonalization.¹⁰ The revolt against technic reason has unfortunately led also to the demeaning of reason altogether, in the sense that rationality has been placed below affectivity in the importance of these two human functions.

The demise of reason, however, can be seen as primarily due to another historical fact, and that is the loss of objectivity in philosophical thinking. At one time, reason was considered a valid and reliable means of attaining objective knowledge. Philosophy has lost this sense of objectivity and reason has come subjectivistic, relativistic, and reducible to mere human opinion.¹¹ Stripped of its credibility, reason has been easily dethroned by affectivity. And the former subjectivism of relativistic reason has been replaced

by a contemporary subjectivism based on affectivity and feeling. The present-day thrust of arationality has also been felt in the area of theology. The affective-feeling dimension plays a major role in situational ethics,¹² and accounts greatly for the present popularity of the Charismatic Movement.

To summarize, arationality is coming to be valued by contemporary society as superior to rationality in the hierarchy of human functions. It has played a major role in the revolt against technology, the dethroning of reason, the stress on personalism, the emphasis on religious emotionalism, and the emergence of contemporary hedonism. Arationality has accordingly become a significant factor in determining the rightness and wrongness of moral conduct. Increasingly, our present society invokes the affective-feeling experience as a guide to moral behavior. Are such arational dimensions indeed superior to rational considerations in the evaluation of moral behavior? It is contended here that they are not.

Feeling is variously defined in Webster as sensation, emotion, affection, sentiment, passion, and unreasoned opinion or belief. This human dimension is ordinarily prominent in aesthetic activities. Today it is a pervasive criterion of what is considered to be morally good or morally evil behavior. In some instances *feeling* accurately recognizes morally evil behavior. Most people *feel* revulsion about sadism and condemn it. But in other situations, feeling may affirm as morally good what is actually otherwise. Fornication and adultery are experienced as good *feelings* by the participants, but in the traditional Christian perspective such behavior is considered to be morally evil. Emotional factors or feelings are also used to justify active euthanasia (mercy-killing) and direct abortion, both of which are rejected by the Christian tradition as morally evil. Again, feeling as an affective experience is a primary motive underlying drug abuse.

Compassion is a wonderful human trait, and pleasure another God-given gift, but do affective factors such as these qualify as moral norms? Love is the basis of the Gospel message, but is the emotional aspect of love its essence, and is the affective aspect intended to be a moral directive? Traditional Christianity considers the most valid discrimination of evil and immorality to be based on a spiritual and intellectual (rational) judgment, rather than upon an affective-feeling (arational) reaction. Moral good and moral evil lie in the preservation or violation, respectively, of the proper relationship between human acts and God's laws governing those acts. Morality is therefore based on an objective norm, recognized and implemented in rational (reasonable) rather than in arational (affective-feeling) ways. Thus, in a previous example, fornication and adultery are transgressions of God's laws on marriage. The affective or *feelings* aspect of sexual intercourse is the same pleasurable experience for one loving one's own spouse, or the single person loving another single person. The distinctions among the moral aspects of these situations rest on a *rational* recognition of how they conform or do not conform to God's law. However, no such moral distinctions can be made on the basis of *feeling*, which can be cited either to support or condemn such behavior. The use of feeling as a moral norm is but another expression of relativism. For who is to say, when *feelings* of one person contradict those of another – for example the rapist and his victim – which feelings are morally good and which are not? When feeling is used as a guide to moral behavior, the inevitable result is moral chaos.

The traditional Christian, therefore, does not consider what feels good necessarily to be morally good behavior. Perhaps in the Garden of Eden original man's *feelings* were consonant with rational judgment, but man in the present human condition lacks such internal harmony that he may have once had.¹³ It is therefore the intelligent, rational analysis of moral behavior rather than an affective-feeling-experience that reveals moral goodness or evil. The Commandments often forbid behavior that *feels* good, and these laws were given to man as a check against such feelings that would lead to immoral behavior. Such precepts in the Christian perspective inform one's conscience and enable one to form correct moral judgments. This is not to say, however, that rationality alone is an adequate moral norm. Impaired human judgment, a consequence of man's original fall, is in need of more trustworthy moral guidance. For the Christian in general, objective norms are provided by the Scriptures, and, for the Catholic, moral guidance is given by the Magisterium as well.

Philosophers of the traditional Christian position have always regarded the rational dimension of human nature (intellect and will) as superior to the sentient dimension (sense perception, emotions, and feelings). While man shares sentient activity with sub-human life, it is primarily the rational dimension

that distinguishes man from, and makes him essentially superior to, all other life forms on earth.¹⁴ It is only appropriate, therefore, that the essentially human quality of rationality (reason) be seen as superior to arationality (feeling) as a norm for behavior that is itself uniquely human, namely, moral behavior.

It should be noted that arationality does play a role in moral behavior, but not as a norm. Rather, arationality enters into the determination of the degree of culpability involved. Emotions and feelings, e.g., those of love, hate, and fear, can attenuate the degree of moral guilt. Even so, they do not dictate the moral norm, nor do they mitigate its obligatory, binding power.¹⁵

The Christian does not demean the affective-feeling dimension of man, but rather, in the realm of moral value judgment, places it in proper perspective. The Christian realizes that affective-feeling-experiences are the source of great pleasure and joy, and especially so when they accord to God's purposes. But the Christian, being a realist, recognizes that man in the human condition lacks the internal harmony once enjoyed by original man, and that arationality can lead one astray when used as a criterion of moral judgment. The fact that affective-sensual motives can tempt man to sin is a constant Scriptural theme. We are to resist the cravings of the flesh (Gal. 5:16-24; Col. 3:5-10), and to practice penance and self-denial in the shouldering of our daily cross (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23).

In conclusion, it can be said that contemporary society has turned man upside down, with arationality considered the highest human dimension, rationality second, and spirituality running a poor third. The challenge to the Christian is to set man aright. Made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26), man is seen in the traditional Christian perspective in the reverse order, with the spiritual dimension at the top of the hierarchy of human functioning, with rationality next, and arationality last. To borrow Freudian terms, the spiritually illumined Superego should guide the Ego, and both should control the Id. To think otherwise, and to act otherwise, is to court moral disaster.

NOTES

¹W. Sahakian, *History of Philosophy*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968.

²W. Sahakian, *Systems of Ethics and Value Theory*, Totowa: Littlefield, Adams, & Co., 1968.

³C. Reich, *The Greening of America*, New York: Random House, 1970.

⁴J. Hammes, *The Christian in the Age of the Id* in *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 1973, V. 1, pp. 34-37.

⁵C. Frankel, *The Nature and Sources of Irrationalism in Science*, 1973, V. 181, pp. 927-931.

⁶T. Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1969.

⁷G. Holton, *On Being Caught Between Dionysians and Apollonians*, in *Daedalus*, 1974, 103, pp. 65-81.

⁸J. Hammes, *op. cit.*

⁹K. Back, *Beyond Words: The Study of Sensitivity Training And the Encounter Movement*, New York: Basic Books, 1972.

¹⁰Roszak, *op. cit.*

¹¹J. Hammes, *The Loss of Objectivity in Modern Man*, in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, 1973, 74, pp. 55-59.

¹²J. Hammes, *Situational Ethics: Tower of Wisdom or Tower of Babel?* in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, 1975, 1, pp. 6-23; also E. Lutzer, *The Morality Gap: An Evangelical Response to Situation Ethics*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1972; and H. Barnett, *The New Theology and Morality*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967.

¹³Hammes, *Situational Ethics*. . . .

¹⁴M. Adler, *The Difference of Man and the Difference it Makes*, Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1967.

¹⁵Hammes, *Situational Ethics*. . . .