



IS EVIL RATIONAL?

DENNIS PRAGER

Ever since the 18th century and the dawning of the so-called “Age of Reason,” most of the best-educated people in the world have been absolutely certain that reason alone will lead us to goodness and a good world. We don’t we need a God. We don’t need religion. All we need is reason. Evil, we have been told for almost three centuries, doesn’t make sense. It’s irrational.

That’s why you’ll often hear murderous dictators referred to as “madmen” and their evil regimes described as products of “madmen;” in other words, the very opposite of rational men. Stalin was irrational. Pol Pot was a madman. Mao’s genocidal Cultural Revolution in which he directed the killing of 50 to 75 million Chinese – in peacetime, no less – is routinely called “madness.” And the Iranian regime’s calls for the annihilation of Israel are routinely dismissed as, you guessed it, irrational.

Meanwhile, good and moral things are always associated with being reasonable. But this association of reason with good is wishful thinking.

Of course, reason might argue for doing good. But it might just as well argue for doing bad. Take a non-murderous example. Is it right or wrong for a student to cheat on a test? It’s wrong, of course. But now answer this: Is it rational or irrational to cheat on a test?

The answer is not quite as obvious – is it? After all, if you can get away with it, and it might mean the difference between getting into a great school or getting a great job, cheating on a test may well be reasonable.

The same logic applies to participating in a shady, but lucrative, business deal or engaging in a marital infidelity. If you know you can get away with it, or simply judge that the benefits of doing something illegal or immoral outweigh the risk of being caught, why not do it?

Or answer this: Was it rational or irrational for a non-Jew in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II to risk his or her life to hide a Jew? We all know that this was moral greatness of the highest order. But was it rational?

Not really. You can’t get much more rational than self-preservation. Moreover, in all the studies I have read of non-Jewish rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust – and I have read many – I have never read of any rescuers who said that they did what they did because it was the reasonable or rational thing to do. Not one.

Reason leads to good only when you want it to. Just as it leads to bad when you want it to. Reason is just a tool. It is no more intrinsically moral than a knife. A knife can be used to

murder or to torture people. But in the hands of a surgeon, it can be used to save lives.

If you want to preserve liberty, then it is rational to fight and risk your life on its behalf. And if you want to maintain a fascist or a Communist or an Islamist dictatorship, then it's equally rational to risk your life on its behalf.

And talking about liberty, it isn't reason that makes people value liberty. Many rational people value security, or order, or territory, or theocracy, or many other things much more than they value liberty.

Reason can lead people to all kinds of conclusions. For example, asked if he would kill a disabled baby, a distinguished professor of philosophy at Princeton University responded, "Yes, if that was in the best interests of the baby and of the family as a whole." Can you offer a purely rational reason why the professor is wrong?

The only reason I can offer is a belief that all human beings are created in God's image and are therefore infinitely precious. But the preciousness of all human life is a belief, not an assertion of reason. The Greeks, the founders of Western reason, thought it quite reasonable to leave sickly babies to die of exposure. The baby would just be a burden on the parents and the state. It was faith-based Jerusalem, the other parent of Western civilization, not reason-based Athens, that taught the world to keep sickly babies alive.

So, the next time you read of some terrible crime or some terrible regime, please don't dismiss it as irrational or mad. Call it for what it is.

Evil.

I'm Dennis Prager.