When Reasons No Longer Persuade

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Introduction

In recent years, many have noticed a striking feature of our public life. People speak with great conviction. They march, protest, organize, and demand change. Yet in many cases, they do not seem interested in offering reasons in the way we have traditionally expected. Positions are asserted, not argued; claims are advanced, not defended. This is not simply a matter of rhetorical style or a failure of education. Something deeper appears to be at work. The familiar expectation that disagreements should be settled, or at least clarified, through the exchange of reasons no longer holds with the same force it once did.[1]

Following this shift in our public life, one may consider a familiar scene. People watch protests unfold on television or through live streams: groups moving through streets, shouting slogans, occupying spaces, sometimes disrupting the ordinary rhythms of civic life. What is striking, however, is not simply the activity itself, but what is often absent from it. Rarely do we encounter careful, sustained efforts on the part of participants to state their demands in a clear, rational, and unambiguous way, accompanied by reasons offered in their defense.

This absence is not compensated for by those reporting on these events. The national media, often sympathetic to many of the stated concerns, seldom press for a more rigorous articulation of the claims being made or the grounds upon which they rest. The result is what might be called an epistemic pass: positions are advanced without a corresponding expectation that they be justified within a shared space of reasons.[2] One is presented not with arguments but with lists of concerns, as though merely naming an issue sufficed to establish its urgency and truth.

Ordinarily, public reasoning proceeds differently. One identifies a problem, shows that it in fact obtains, and then offers a proposal for addressing it. For example, claims about injustice would typically be supported by evidence drawn from broader patterns rather than isolated instances, and proposed remedies would be weighed against alternatives with attention to their likely consequences. The burden

of argument lies with those who seek to change the existing order: they must show not only that a problem exists, but also that their proposed solution is both coherent and preferable.

Yet increasingly, this pattern appears to be bypassed. The issues in question are treated as though they were self-evident—visible to anyone not blinded by their own position within the social order. Those who do not see what is claimed are not so much refuted as diagnosed: their inability to recognize the problem is taken as evidence of their complicity in it. The failure is not one of reasoning, but of perception. One does not disagree; one does not yet see.

At this point, the phenomenon becomes clearer. What appears, from within the traditional framework, as a failure to give reasons may instead reflect a deeper conviction: that the very demand for reasons already belongs to a way of thinking that must be overcome.[3] If what one believes is determined by one's place within a broader social structure, then the task is not to justify one's claims within that structure, but to disclose what that structure conceals. The aim shifts from argument to revelation, from persuasion to manifestation.

To understand this shift, it is helpful to employ a distinction introduced by the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars between what he called the *manifest image* and the *scientific image* of the world.[4] The manifest image is the world as we ordinarily encounter it. It is a world populated by persons—agents who act, deliberate, and take responsibility for what they do. In this world, actions are explained by reasons. I went to the airport because I believed that someone was arriving and because I desired to meet him. Such explanations are not peripheral to our experience; they are constitutive of it. The manifest image is thus deeply teleological: a world structured by purpose, intention, and meaning.

This is the world in which we immediately dwell, a world that phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger have explored with particular care. It is the world of lived experience, of everyday understanding—of what things mean before we step back to theorize about them.[5] In this world, the giving and asking for reasons is not an optional practice. It is the way in which human life is ordinarily rendered intelligible.

Alongside this stands the scientific image. Here, the aim is not to describe how the world appears, but to uncover the underlying structures that explain why it appears as it does. Colors become wavelengths, intentions become neural processes, and behavior becomes the outcome of causal interactions among more basic elements. The scientific image seeks the ultimate "stuff" of reality and the laws governing its behavior. It moves from meaning to mechanism, from purpose to cause.

There is no necessary contradiction between these images. However, there is a tension. The manifest image explains action by appeal to reasons; the scientific image explains it by appeal to causes. The former presupposes agents who can justify

what they do; the latter treats behavior as the outcome of underlying processes that do not themselves stand in need of justification.[6] This tension becomes especially significant when extended to the social world. If human thought and action are ultimately determined by underlying structures—whether biological, economic, or cultural—then what appears in the manifest image as rational deliberation may, at a deeper level, be understood as the effect of forces that operate independently of reasons. The language of "levels" is often used to capture this relation: higher-level phenomena, such as beliefs and decisions, are said to depend on lower-level structures in such a way that no difference at the higher level occurs without a corresponding difference at the lower.[7]

In this way of thinking, the distribution of beliefs in a society is not primarily the result of individuals weighing reasons but of the underlying conditions that shape those individuals. What people take to be justified may itself be a function of deeper causal determinants. The space of reasons, so central to the manifest image, is thus reinterpreted within a framework that ultimately explains it in non-rational terms.[8]

At this point, the implications begin to emerge. If what we take to be reasons are themselves products of underlying structures, then their authority is no longer straightforward. They may still function within the manifest image, but their ultimate explanation lies elsewhere. And if that is so, then the role of reason in human life is no longer what it once appeared to be.

1. Belief as Expression

One way to understand this shift is to consider an alternative picture of how beliefs arise. On the traditional view, a person comes to hold a belief because he or she has reasons for it. The belief is, at least in principle, responsive to evidence and open to revision in light of better arguments. But there is another way to think about belief, one that has become increasingly influential in contemporary thought. On this view, what a person believes is not primarily the result of weighing reasons but of occupying a particular social position.[9] One's class, race, gender, economic standing, and cultural location do not merely influence one's thinking; they help determine it. Beliefs are thus less like conclusions reached and more like expressions of a standpoint.

If this is so, then the role of reason changes fundamentally. To ask someone to give reasons for a belief presupposes that the belief stands in need of justification and that such justification can, in principle, be recognized across different perspectives. But if beliefs are understood as products of social location, then the demand for reasons begins to look misplaced. One does not justify one's position so much as articulate it. The point is not to persuade others by offering arguments

they could, in principle, accept, but to make visible what one's position discloses.[10] What appears, from within the traditional framework, as a refusal to argue may instead reflect a deeper conviction: that argument itself no longer occupies the central place it once did.

When this scientific image is extended to the social world, its implications become far-reaching. Marxist-inspired social theory assumes that the beliefs, values, and actions of human beings are not primarily the result of rational deliberation but are instead determined by underlying material conditions.[11] What appears, within the manifest image, as reasoning and justification is, at a deeper level, the expression of forces that operate independently of reason itself.

For Karl Marx, these determining forces were economic. The distribution of wealth, the structure of production, and the movement of capital shape not only what people do, but also what they think and value. Human consciousness does not stand over against these conditions as an independent tribunal; it arises from them. What one takes to be justified is itself a function of one's position within the economic order. Beliefs are thus not simply held—they are produced.[12] This insight did not disappear with the nineteenth century. It was refined and extended by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, including figures such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Recognizing that economic determinism alone could not explain the persistence of modern capitalist societies, they turned to culture, consciousness, and social formation more broadly. Yet the basic structure remained. What people take to be rational, just, or true is shaped by deeper conditions that they themselves do not control.[13]

These thinkers were not naïve. They sought not only to understand society but also to transform it. They argued that modern social life contains structures of domination that generate suffering and that human beings can, at least in principle, be emancipated from these structures.[14] But this introduces a difficulty. If thought itself is conditioned by the very structures one seeks to overcome, then the claim to have attained a clearer or truer understanding of those structures becomes philosophically unstable.

The problem can be stated simply. If beliefs are determined by underlying conditions, then the belief that one has correctly identified those conditions must itself be so determined. The claim to insight becomes one more expression of the very system it seeks to critique.[15] Yet critical theory cannot abandon the claim to insight, for without it there is no basis for critique or transformation.

At this point, the pressure intensifies. In order to transform society, one must assume that some forms of consciousness are, in fact, more adequate than others—that they see more truly. But in order to maintain the explanatory framework, one must also hold that all consciousness is conditioned. The result is a tension that

cannot easily be resolved: a theory that seeks both to explain belief as determined and to privilege certain beliefs as revealing.

It is precisely here that the space of reasons begins to erode. If what one believes is determined by one's position, then argument cannot function as justification in the traditional sense. It becomes instead a form of expression—a manifestation of the standpoint from which it arises. The appeal to reasons does not ground the claim; it displays it.

2. The Paradox of Critical Consciousness

THE DIFFICULTY EMERGES WHEN THIS ACCOUNT of belief is joined to a further claim, often made explicitly or implicitly, within contemporary critical discourse: that some have attained a clearer or more truthful grasp of social reality than others. The language of "awakening, "consciousness," or "seeing what others cannot see," suggests that certain perspectives disclose what is in fact the case, while others remain bound by illusion or ideology.[16] The contrast is not merely descriptive but evaluative. Some stand within distortion; others have, at least in part, escaped it.

Yet this introduces a tension. If all beliefs are products of social location, then the beliefs of those who claim such critical insight must themselves arise from a particular location and the conditions that structure it. Their judgments, no less than those they criticize, would seem to be expressions of a standpoint rather than conclusions warranted independently of it. The claim to see through ideology would itself be ideologically conditioned. The assertion of privilege in insight sits uneasily with the insistence that all insight is conditioned.

This tension becomes most apparent when one attempts to move from expression to justification. The one who claims a critical consciousness cannot enter the shared space of reasons without, at that very moment, loosening the claim that his or her position is wholly determined by social location. To offer reasons is, in principle, to invite others to see what one sees and to assent on the basis of considerations that transcend any single standpoint. But if such transcendence is denied—if all belief is fixed by location—then the act of giving reasons no longer functions as justification. It becomes, at best, another expression of position.

Accordingly, a peculiar situation arises. The critically awakened may speak forcefully and with deep conviction, but the traditional practice of arguing for one's claims becomes unstable. To justify is already to step into a space that the underlying theory calls into question. The result is not silence in the literal sense, but a shift in the function of speech itself. Words are no longer offered primarily as reasons meant to persuade; they are offered as manifestations meant to disclose. One shows one's position more than one argues for it.

This helps explain why disagreements in our public life so often seem resistant to resolution. It is not simply that people disagree about facts or values. It is that they no longer share, in the same way, a commitment to the practice of giving and asking for reasons as the means by which such disagreements might be addressed. Where that commitment weakens, persuasion gives way to expression, and argument yields to the presentation of standpoint.

3. When Argument Breaks Down

If this analysis is correct, then many features of our contemporary public life become more intelligible. One frequently encounters situations in which one party offers data, draws distinctions, and attempts to build a case, while another responds not by contesting the argument on its own terms, but by locating the speaker within a social framework said to explain the argument itself. What is offered as a reason is received as a symptom. The exchange does not quite fail; it simply operates on different levels. One side continues to inhabit the space of reasons, while the other has shifted to an analysis of the conditions under which such reasons arise.

In such a setting, disagreement is no longer primarily about the truth of a claim but about the standpoint from which the claim is made. To question an argument is to question the position of the one making it. This helps explain why appeals to evidence so often seem to have little effect. Evidence, after all, functions within a framework in which claims are evaluated for their truth. But if claims are understood instead as expressions of social location, then the introduction of further evidence does not address the deeper issue. It may even reinforce suspicion, appearing as yet another instance of a standpoint attempting to universalize itself.

The result is a growing asymmetry in public discourse. Those who continue to rely on argument often assume that more careful reasoning, clearer distinctions, or better evidence will eventually carry the day. Those who operate with a more critical understanding of belief may see such efforts as beside the point. The aim is not to persuade within a shared framework but to expose the framework itself as conditioned and, in some sense, distorting. What one side experiences as a breakdown in rational exchange, the other may experience as a necessary refusal to participate in a practice that conceals more than it reveals.

This does not mean that speech ceases or that conviction weakens. On the contrary, expression can become more intense as the expectation of persuasion diminishes. But the character of speech changes. It becomes less oriented toward the mutual recognition of reasons and more toward the articulation of identity, experience, and standpoint. Where argument once aimed at agreement, expression aims at disclosure. And where the space of reasons recedes, the possibility of being

persuaded—of genuinely changing one's mind in response to what another says—becomes increasingly fragile.

4. Speaking Again

At the limit, the difficulty becomes clear. A position that understands itself as wholly conditioned by a particular standpoint cannot easily be justified in a way that transcends that standpoint. To offer such a justification would already be to step beyond the very framework that gives the position its meaning. What results is a shift in the function of speech itself. One does not so much argue for one's position as exhibit it. One shows it rather than says it in a way that could claim universal validity.

This distinction recalls, in a different register, a theme explored by Søren Kierkegaard in his discussion of Abraham. Abraham cannot justify his action within the ordinary space of ethical reasoning without rendering himself unintelligible. What he does can only be shown, not made comprehensible through reasons available to all.[17] Whatever one makes of Kierkegaard's analysis, it illustrates a crucial point: there are forms of commitment that resist translation into the shared language of justification.

Something analogous appears in contemporary discourse. Where belief is understood as the expression of a standpoint rather than the outcome of reasoning, the attempt to justify that belief within a common framework risks undermining it. The more one argues, the more one seems to concede that one's position stands in need of justification in a space that the underlying theory calls into question. Speech becomes strained—not because conviction is weak, but because the conditions for justification are no longer shared.

For Christian theology, this situation presses an unavoidable question: Can speech still bear truth in a way that is not reducible to the standpoint from which it arises? The proclamation of the gospel assumes that it can—that what is said can be heard as true, not merely as the expression of a position. It assumes, in other words, that there remains a space in which words can do more than display where we stand. They can address us, call us, and, in some measure, persuade us. If that space is lost, then persuasion gives way to expression, and argument yields to manifestation. If it is preserved, however tenuously, then speech remains possible in a deeper sense. The task, then, is not simply to speak, but to speak in confidence that what is said may yet be heard—not as the echo of a standpoint, but as bearing truth.

What is finally at stake here is not only the fate of public argument but also the intelligibility of life itself. Human life can be publicly honored and protected only where it is understood to possess a significance not reducible to the interests, location, or interpretive framework of those who speak about it. Once the space

of reasons is eclipsed by the language of standpoint, the human being no longer appears with the same ontological weight. Life is redescribed through categories of social function, power, embodiment, and liberation, and the question of what a human being is begins to yield to the question of how that being is situated within structures of meaning and conflict.

The result is not merely theoretical confusion. It is a weakening of the cultural conditions under which life can appear as inviolable. Where ontology gives way to critique and truth to manifestation, life itself becomes increasingly vulnerable to redescription. And what can first be redescribed can later be denied.

Conclusion

We began with a simple observation: in many areas of contemporary life, reasons no longer seem to persuade as they once did. What initially appears as a failure of argument or a breakdown in civility may, on closer inspection, reflect a deeper shift in how belief itself is understood. If beliefs are taken to be products of social location rather than conclusions reached through the weighing of reasons, then the practice of justification is inevitably weakened. What can be expressed need not be defended; what is disclosed need not be argued for.

This shift helps explain both the intensity and the intractability of many present disagreements. Participants in public discourse often no longer share the same assumptions about what it means to offer a reason or to be persuaded by one. Where that shared commitment erodes, argument gives way to expression, and the hope for resolution diminishes. The issue is not simply that we disagree, but that we increasingly lack a common understanding of how disagreement might be addressed.

To recognize this is not yet to resolve the problem, but to name it more precisely. In naming it, one also sees more clearly what is at stake. The erosion of the space of reasons is not merely a procedural loss within public discourse. It bears directly upon the question of life. *For where speech can no longer bear truth in a way meant to bind us all, human life itself becomes harder to name as possessing an intrinsic worth that claims protection*. It is then interpreted less as a reality to be acknowledged than as a phenomenon to be situated within competing social narratives. If the space of reasons is lost, the ontology of life is weakened with it. If it is preserved, however tenuously, then life may yet appear again not merely as material to be interpreted, but as a reality bearing its own claim upon us. Without that confidence, persuasion fades, and with it the public intelligibility of life itself. With it, even fragile words may still defend what otherwise slips from view.

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Notes

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 8–42.
2. Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), §§36–38.
3. For influential formulations of this shift in terms of standpoint and social location, see Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936); and, for more recent developments in standpoint epistemology, Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
4. Wilfrid Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 1–40.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §§12–18.
6. Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," 5–10
7. Jaegwon Kim, "Supervenience and Mind," in *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53–78.
8. For a classic articulation of the "space of reasons," see Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," §§ 36–38; see also Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 5–15.
9. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 55–87.
10. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, 119–37; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 251–71.
11. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 20–21.
12. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 47–52.
13. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1–34.
14. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188–243.

15. For this reflexivity problem, see Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 75–90; cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 308–17.

16. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 64–66; cf. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 149–222.

17. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), 54–70.

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