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Reading Reason with Emmanuel Eze

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Emmanuel Eze's last and, terribly, posthumous book is *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (2008). It sounds, largely, a continuation of the themes rung in all his previous work as writer and theorist, teacher, editor, philosophical organizer: the racializing activity and colonialist backdrop of modern European philosophy's most celebrated thinkers, and the nexus of what he sometimes called "African/a" philosophies and the necessity of their dialogue. But it might also have been a new beginning for its author, exploring as he had not done before the ontology of reason and its fate in an increasingly bleak future.

Eze's impact on philosophy during his brief stay extends significantly beyond that of his own writings, important as they are. He played a salutary role in the development of

Africana philosophy through his founding and editorship of the journal *Philosophia Africana*. The journal under Eze's editorial leadership was committed to promoting "scholarly exchanges across [the] historical and cultural boundaries" represented by African, African-American, and Afro-Caribbean philosophical traditions. He also edited two important anthologies, *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (1997) and *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (1998), in which he took pains to draw contributions from writers working in all of these three subdisciplinary formations.

Eze is perhaps best known for his critical reading of Kant's anthropological writings and the philosophical 'raciology' they contain, in his important article, "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology." He extended that critique to include Hume as well in his edited volume on *Race and the Enlightenment*. Indeed, Emmanuel Eze was the contemporary writer who most consistently explored the issue of the racial logic of the founding thinkers of the European enlightenment. In *Achieving our Humanity: The Idea of a Postracial Future* (2001), Eze extended that inquiry, discussing at length the history of race conceptions in European thought, arguing that the modern origins of philosophical racism in Europe lie in the writings of Hume and Kant, and reflecting on the cultural issues faced by Africans in the diaspora.

He was something of a 'hardliner' on the role of modern European philosophy, arguing both that the racism that ravaged Africa and produced the horrors of the middle passage and New World slavery was a modern invention underwritten by the 'greats' of the modern philosophical tradition, and that the philosophical foundation of the 'Enlightenment project' was itself compromised by the pervasive racialization of the social thought of its celebrated founding figures. He emphatically rejected the suggestion

that “we ‘separate’ the ideal from the real [Enlightenment], holding on to one while rejecting the other.” (Eze 1997, 12). “It is more appropriate,” Eze claimed, “to consider Africa’s experience of the ‘Age of Europe’ as the *cost* of Occidental modernity.” (Eze 1997, 13) There were signs his hard-line attitude had softened by the time *Achieving our Humanity* was written. There he justified his concerns about what he saw as Kant’s racializing of reason by referring to himself as one of those “who do not wish to continue to see the word ‘universalism’ regarded as a curse word (to damn nonwhite cultures or as an expletive against white cultures) [and] are interested in separating true from false universalism.” (Eze 2001, 81) *On Reason* (2008) can be seen as Eze’s constructive response to his abiding concern with the consequences of European enlightenment’s racialization of reason: if no nonracialized version of European philosophy’s method can be recuperated, then we must look elsewhere for a truly universal account of reason.

Eze begins *On Reason* arguing for a redescription of a fundamental predicament familiar from the history of Western philosophic reason. That predicament, in its traditional Humean-Kantian form, is reason’s insufficiency to the task of the thoroughgoing normative grounding of its own procedures. Traditionally, the predicament is generated through an insistence that reason be univocal, that all its forms and manifestations can be recuperated in some unitary, total, absolute and seamless whole. Eze redescribes the predicament by relaxing the insistence: reason, he claims, is inherently diverse and plural. The predicament in its traditional form, Eze argues, stems from a willful refusal to see reason’s, as well as being’s, diversity. (Although he does not argue this, that refusal can be regarded as the shadow of European philosophy’s complicity in slavery and colonialism.) It is also a refusal of the ordinary: “I suggest a different approach to what should be seen as the ordinary problem of reason: How do you articulate diverse historical

forms of rationality?” (8) In answering that question, Eze develops what he calls a “vernacular theory of rationality.”

Eze mostly skirts the temptation to offer a unitary account of the origin of reason’s diversity. One strand of his argument, however, situates this origin in what he calls “a gap in thought, a *breach in tongue*.” (9) Eze sees the course of ordinary experience as necessarily involving gaps between distinct particular items of perception, particular moments of experience. This noncoincidence in the texture of experience results in an “epistemic gap in everyday linguistic perception;” but this is a productive gap, Eze claims, “absolutely necessary for the autonomous emergence of thought.” This productive absence of unity is the work of thought, and “it is only in the history of the work that thought becomes manifest as universal language.”

It is because language is thus thoroughly historical that thinking, too, is historically fated. And inasmuch as thinking is both worldly and historically fated, there cannot be just one way or one kind of expression of thought. There are many forms of expressions of thought. There are many universal languages of reason. (9)

While every language is the result of a particular set of historical conditions, the ‘breach’ or ‘gap’ Eze identifies is constitutive of them all.

Eze situates himself within “an Afro-modern postcolonial vernacular tradition of thought,” (12) but much of the argumentative playbook displayed in Eze’s text derives from phenomenological, “postmodern,” and neo-pragmatist critiques of the mainstream modernist ‘speculative’ conception of reason. The first chapter’s longest section, on phenomenological reason, sets up his own, “vernacular” account of reason – which he calls, at one point, “a vernacular phenomenology” (88) – he nonetheless insists in the same

breath that such a conception “must present itself as empirically ordinary rather than absolutely speculative.” By the book’s end, we see that much of the sense of “ordinary” comes from its opposition to appeals in political discourse to extraordinary rationales for action:

Race, Nation, God: these are the codes for the miraculous and the spectacular. They are the grounds of those messianic elements in politics which produce catastrophes that, in the name of transforming history seem only to wreck it. (253)

The examples he mentions, “Holocaust, colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow, and apartheid,” all involve “totalistic forms of thought;” this is a large part of the basis of Eze’s “rejection of politics-as-the-extraordinary.” But he also says, in strikingly Rortyan tones, that “in Africa as in much of the Third World, there are too many gods and prophets and too few doctors, nurses, and engineers.” (252)

In championing a shift from exclusionary top-down approaches to rationality characteristic of the high-modern European philosophical tradition, to a thoroughly open-ended and inclusivist practice of justification that is ecumenical, public, grounded in experience of the ‘ordinary,’ Eze hoped to advance a “progressive” political agenda while avoiding the entanglements of reason traditionally conceived in fruitless internal squabbles. Thus we find nearly contiguous claims that the version of reason he defends is “admittedly burdened, imperfect, but serviceable” and at the same time “a critical, progressive theory of rationality.” (246) The progressivism is of a meliorist, incremental sort; the aim is to “promote... the ordinary ideals of citizenship and equality for all” (252) and “democracy as ordinary, not revolutionary, politics.” (256)

Eze’s deep ambivalence toward modernization and the enlightenment project, highlighted in his earlier work, seems

to be crystallized in his insistent appeal to the “vernacular” in this last book. The “vernacular theory of rationality” (113) derives especially from “post-philosophical” practice in “recently postcolonized countries” and is indicated by his observation that “the traditions of philosophy in Brazil, India, and Nigeria have generally insouciantly borrowed combined insights from linguistics, anthropology, literature, and the plastic arts,” (111) a list of disciplines that consists, in its first three items, of the predominant sources (outside disciplinary philosophy) Eze himself plumbs in *On Reason*. If the self-conceptions of high modernist European philosophy have gone bust, and the “master narratives” have all collapsed, it can be tough making one’s way amidst the rubble. The natural instinct would be to try to move in the same direction, especially if one distrusts any claims for an alternative as “extraordinary.” A ground-clearing operation is called for, and “ordinary reason” might be the implement closest to hand. I have some misgivings about this overall approach.

It is a curious fact about Eze’s argument that, having devoted so much energy to a discussion of multiple conceptions of reason, and having asserted a thesis on the inherent diversity of reason, he should write of ‘ordinary’ reason as though this were a single undifferentiated and consistent thing. ‘Thing’ because while initially and implicitly rejecting the notion that reason is a thing, he settles on a way of discussing the issues he has raised as though the appeal to ‘ordinary reason’ would suffice, even on a programmatic level. ‘Ordinary’ in fact means several things in Eze’s text, as it is used contrastively to several conceptual targets of his critique. ‘Ordinary’ reason is distinguished from reason as a ‘high science of thought’ (10); from “the metaphysical, transcendental, and quasi-transcendental” (18); ordinary is contrasted with speculative, is identified with “unmiraculous and nonspectacular” (230); ordinary reason is characterized by “its abstemiousness in relation to grandiose claims” (248). In the final chapter, on politics, ordinary reason is identified with “public reason”

and the norms of modern liberal democracy, and contrasted with revolutionary or radically transformative politics of any kind. The point is that Eze's multivalent "ordinary" is in itself diverse. That's not a count against it nor against his theory. It does not always seem to figure enough in what he says about it, though, and in the way he invokes it. The fact that it is just this diversity of ordinary reason that often calls forth the more reflective and intricate gyrations of thought we think of as speculative and philosophical also doesn't seem to figure in Eze's argument. But it should not be forgotten, and makes the appeal to ordinary reason as a postcolonial arbiter somewhat suspect.

There is a related issue concerning the list he provides of conceptions of reason he discusses, an issue that also relates to this problem of the univocity of what he calls 'ordinary reason.' It has to do with the curious absence of 'dialectical reason' from his text. He does often use 'dialectic' and 'dialectical' himself. Consider this passage:

...it is memory and history that, dialectically, constitute the subjectivity of an individual. "Dialectics" should here be understood in its most elemental form: the conversation of the soul with itself. (126)

This figure Eze proposes, suggests dialectic as the location of the first conception of reason's diversity. Yet there is no 'dialectical reason' in the survey of Western conceptions of rationality that starts the book (a critical resume and analysis of the calculative, formal, hermeneutical, empirical-probabilistic, phenomenological, and ordinary conceptions of reason). Could it be that Eze felt there was too little to recommend it when stacked up against, say, the phenomenological or hermeneutical conceptions that are included in the roster of options? We're given no clue. Given the depth and global breadth of dialectic in the European tradition as well as in others, that seems odd at least.

Emmanuel Eze has left us with questions about reason and philosophy and their purchase on a globalizing world. The radical skepticism about race he introduced in *Achieving our Humanity* persists in *On Reason*, where the appeal to the 'ordinary' suggests a generality of human experience that is beyond, or beneath, racializing. But can ordinary reason, the "authority of conscience" and "the natural and ordinary intuitions embodied in this conscience," (243) really bear the weight of an anti-racist project? If it is true that "diversity is at the heart of reason" and that diversity "goes all the way down" (112), what sense does it make to call such an account of reason "progressive"? If there is progress in reason, as Eze seems to suggest in claiming that "the rational emerges out of its own historical fate," how does "ordinary reason" itself progress? These questions suggest an uncertainty about reason's fate that may be characteristic of our times of global war and terror. The vernacular theory of rationality seems poised between progressivist campaign and pluralist bazaar. But the difficulties of Emmanuel Eze's final text are ours, as is the vital legacy of his important work. May his optimism and his unyielding search for a reasoned universalism be ours as well.

References

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