



## Clanking Chains: Horkheimer in “The Authoritarian Personality”; Cartesian Rationalism/Modern Philosophy Reject Christianity

- 80- Well, I think we have enough of a vocabulary to move forward with our first excerpt from *The Authoritarian Personality*. The first will be taken from its preface written by Max Horkheimer, one of the first directors of the Frankfurt School and author of the *magnum opus* on Critical Theory, *Eclipse of Reason*, published in 1946.

**Adorno, Theodor W., et al. “Preface.” Max Horkheimer. In *The Authoritarian Personality*. Abr. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982), xi-xiii:**

This book is about social discrimination. The central theme is a relatively new concept—the rise of an “anthropological” species we call the authoritarian type of man. In contrast to the bigot of the older style, he seems to combine the ideas and skills which are typical of a highly industrialized society with irrational beliefs. He is at the same time enlightened and superstitious, jealous of his independence and inclined to submit blindly to power and authority.

The authors do not ... think ... the problem of religious and racial hatreds, can be tackled successfully either by the propaganda of tolerance or by apologetic refutation of errors and lies. Quite the contrary: the authors are imbued with the conviction that ... scientific elucidation of a phenomenon of such great historical meaning can contribute directly to an amelioration of the cultural atmosphere in which hatred breeds.

In the history of civilization there have been not a few instances when mass delusions were healed not by focused propaganda but ... because scholars ... studied what lay at the root of the delusion.

I should like to cite two examples. The superstitious belief in witchcraft was overcome in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries after men had come more and more under the influence of the results of modern science. The impact of Cartesian rationalism was decisive.

Cartesian rationalism refers to the philosophy of René Descartes \dā-kart\ *Latin*: Renatus Cartesius \kar-'tē-zhē-us\. He attempted to unify all knowledge as the product of clear reasoning from self-evident premises. [*Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Publishers, 1995), 286.]

Descartes ... was the first to liberate philosophical thought from the confines of tradition-bound Scholasticism. Hegel and many others have called him the father of modern philosophy. [*Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed., 5:600.]

A brief description of Descartes' rationalism might be helpful to some. If you want to doze off, fine; but you'll need to make it quick—this won't last long.

**Descartes, René. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences*. In *Great Books of the Western World*. Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 31:51, 54:**



Because I wished to give myself entirely to the search after Truth, I thought that it was necessary for me to take an apparently opposite course, and to reject as absolutely false everything as to which I could imagine the least ground of doubt, in order to see if afterwards there remained anything in my belief that was entirely certain. Thus, because our senses sometimes deceive us, I wished to suppose that nothing is just as they cause us to imagine it to be. I resolved to assume that everything that ever entered into my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterwards I noticed that while I thus wished to think all things false, it was absolutely essential that the “I” who thought this should be ... remarking that this truth “I think, therefore I am” was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I came to the conclusion that I could receive it without scruple as the first principle of the Philosophy for which I was seeking. (p. 51)

We should never allow ourselves to be persuaded excepting by the evidence of our Reason. Reason does not insist that whatever we see or imagine thus is a truth, but it tells us clearly that all our ideas or notions must have some foundation of truth.

Reason tells us that since our thoughts cannot possibly be all true, because we are not altogether perfect, that which they have of truth must infallibly be met with in our waking experience rather than in that of our dreams. (p. 54)

Descartes is credited with developing the foundation to modern philosophy. Horkheimer’s reference to “Cartesian rationalism” has to do with Descartes’ principle of confirming truth by pure reason based on self-evident facts. A synopsis of Descartes’ philosophy is provided by:

**Elwell, Walter A. (ed.). *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 313:**

Modern philosophy is generally said to have begun with René Descartes. “Modern” is here applied to much of the thought of the seventeenth century to imply a break between medieval and postmedieval philosophy. Clearly there was with Descartes ... a shift of interest from theological themes to a study of nature and of man without explicit reference to God.

His fundamental aim was to attain philosophical truth by the use of reason. He wished to develop a system of true propositions, in which nothing would be presupposed that was not self-evident and unquestionable. His ideal of knowledge was an ordered system of propositions dependent on one another. This ideal was suggested in large part by mathematics.

By this method he systematically doubted each proposition that could possibly be doubted as a preliminary to the establishment of certain knowledge. Having subjected to doubt all that can be doubted, he arrived at the “simple” and unquestionable proposition, *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I am). However much I doubt, I must exist. Otherwise, I could not doubt.

Next Descartes attempted to prove the existence of God. This illustrates an essential feature of his thought and is very significant to later developments in the history of philosophy. So far Descartes had established only that he existed as a thinking being; now he proceeded entirely from the contents of his own consciousness to prove the existence of something else.

Horkheimer advanced Descartes’ idea that rationalism was the only method of determining truth thus rejecting religion as “superstition.” He illustrates this in his first example which classifies the superstitions related to witchcraft as proof that religion is myth and thus an invalid consideration in one’s search for truth. Continuing now with Horkheimer in:



*Adorno, et al., The Authoritarian Personality, xi-xii:*

The superstitious belief in witchcraft was overcome in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries after men had come more and more under the influence of the results of modern science. The impact of Cartesian rationalism was decisive. This school of philosophers demonstrated that the previously accepted belief in the immediate effect of spiritual factors on the realm of the corporal is an illusion. Once this scientifically untenable dogma was eliminated, the foundations of the belief in magic were destroyed.

Principle: If you cannot analyze history from a biblical perspective then you cannot truly understand history. Horkheimer and his ilk looked on witchcraft as an illusion. But was it? Witchcraft is a manifestation of demonism and demon possession. The English word “witch” is a misnomer. The better word is “magic” and the power to perform it is supplied by Lucifer through demon possession. More commonly it is the deployment of illusions common to the legerdemain and prestidigitation used in its trickery.

Pharaoh’s “magicians” utilized these tactics during the Ten Plagues which hit Egypt just prior to the Exodus. Moses and Aaron were able to counter each of their magical efforts by the performance of miracles empowered by God.

The validity of “magic” can be disproved by investigation and the application of scientific principles to the events that seem visually to have occurred but in reality are delusions.

However, the miracles of God are real. He does intervene into history, and so arranges history that prayers are answered, logistics are supplied, and help is given in accordance with the administration of His perfect plan and in accordance with the faith and spiritual growth of the believer.

Horkheimer, however, viewed the dependence on “metaphysical” powers, be they demonic witchcraft or divine acts, as illusions. This is how “Cartesian rationalism” was applied to the subject of religion. It is the reason that spiritual matters, e.g., belief systems, faith, prayer, miracles, and divine intervention into history were completely refuted, ignored, and ridiculed by post-Cartesian philosophers, including Horkheimer and his associates at the Frankfurt School.