

Bismarck with an iPhone: The Future of the Age of Reason

By Doron Avital

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the "Trump phenomenon" as a reference point for an examination of a comprehensive historical process whose essence is an attack targeting "the liberal order." This process is gaining momentum today with the Coronavirus Pandemic and its global implications. The uniqueness of the move elaborated in this paper is the examination of the subject matter through the prism of the philosophy of language and logic that played center stage in the story of the analytic philosophy of the 20th century. This period saw the planting of the seeds that resonate today in the political and economic upheaval that is engulfing the world and that threatens to bring on the collapse of the old liberal order.

The Age of Reason and its Enemies ¹

Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the United States was perceived by liberal circles in the West – the intellectual elites as well as large sections of the financial elites, and certainly the high-tech community and the media leadership – as an attack on the formative logic of the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason and of Modernity as its crown-prize. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, a leading representative of the liberal *Zeitgeist*, described it as an "attack on Truth and Science." Note: The election of Trump is not seen as an election of a political alternative but as an attack on concepts supposedly devoid of "political" meaning, that is, truth and science.

Indeed, the *New York Times*, a newspaper that for the Western elites represents a general and predominant political disposition, has established itself in its editorials and opinions as a political and intellectual opposition to what might be called the "Trump phenomenon": a broad global counter-reaction to liberalism and to the forces of globalization. The newspaper in fact identifies the logic of globalization, political and

1. This paper is based on a study that I have written as a senior research fellow of The School of Political Science, Government, and International Affairs at Tel Aviv University, during the academic year of 2016-2017. It began before Donald Trump's election to the presidency of the United States and ended after him assuming office. The move described in this paper is more valid now with the Coronavirus Pandemic and its global implications, as they herald the end of the old liberal order of the second half of the 20th century. I used the title "Bismarck with an iPhone" to describe the new *Zeitgeist* that must now be emerging. I was careful to preserve the spirit of my original paper and avoid applying its argument with hindsight from today's events, apart, perhaps, from occasional notes (marked with asterisks) that may shed light on the way the original paper anticipated the dramatic events we are now witnessing.

geopolitical alike – the logic of a "Flat World" ² – with the voice of reason of the Enlightenment. According to this line of thinking, the Trump phenomenon represents an attack on rationality, truth, science, and facts – as these concepts were formulated and shaped starting with Emanuel Kant, to mention one of the founding giants of the Enlightenment Project.

One article published in the *New York Times* on February 27, 2017, expounding this line of thought, is that of David Brooks. Its title is: "The Enlightenment Project."³ The article draws on insights from the work of Charles Hale, a lecturer at Yale University. The reasoning of the article is simple and schematic. I believe we will not do it injustice if we deconstruct it in the following simplistic way:

1. The Enlightenment project created the modern world
2. The modern world is a success story in terms of science and technology
3. The modern world, through its political practice and institutions strives for moral progress
4. At the basis the success of the project, lies a rebellion against authority as what anchors knowledge and replacing it with the independent voice of reason and rationality as they are being interwoven into rules that can govern our practice
5. Modern political institutions are therefore built on well-crafted rules and thereof on respect to the rule of law

2. "Flat World" is a term coined by Thomas Friedman in his book *The World Is Flat* (2005), in which he announced the birth of a new era of common geopolitics driven by the information and hi-tech revolution.

3. Brook's article was also titled with, "The Age of Reason."

6. The success of the modern project is the result of attaining truth through the scientific method that is based on well-established facts and a spirit of inquiry that subject any claim of knowledge to doubt unless it stands to rigorous, empirical, and rational scrutiny
7. On world stage, success is achieved through maximum global cooperation designed to secure that conflicts be resolved in a rational and non-violent fashion
8. The Enlightenment project is under attack around the world by political leaders the like of Trump and Putin and by decisions such as Brexit
9. The attack threatens to replace objective rationality as well as the respect for rules and institutions – the hallmarks of the Enlightenment project – with decisions that have their anchor in the instincts of the common people, the deep-rooted consciousness of nations and the insights of authoritative leaders as better representatives of the people and their spirit
10. The Enlightenment project had been attacked in the past. Now we must fight back to restore its promise.

Brooks' article represents a predominant mindset among the elites of the West. Since the election of Trump, it has been fashionable to say that this is the end of the age of reason. In the US for example the anti-liberal crowd will accept this verdict with an overt joy while liberals will either admit this with pain and an anxiety as to what lies ahead in the future or, as with Brooks, with a call for the restoration of the order of the Enlightenment: a battle cry to restore the old order.

What we will argue here is that a re-examination of the political and geopolitical logic of the Enlightenment is mandatory. A new chapter of the enlightenment needs to be written but one that is fully aware of its own inner fallacies. The version of the enlightenment that took prominence in the second half of the 20th century and then was fast-tracked to new heights with the information revolution has exhausted its creative and progressive powers. A revision is necessary.

The critique of the failures of the Enlightenment has a rich philosophical background that usually appears under the heading of "post-modern" thought. An important and central voice in this school of thought is Michel Foucault. A key concept in his thinking is "the history of the present." In a deep sense, what we will try to do here is to inquire into the logic of "the history of the present." True, most research into the political and geopolitical of the present times focuses on the socioeconomical background: the rise of financial capitalism where profit bottom-line overshadows genuine value-creation, the 2008 crisis and the sky-rocketing inequality gap, the growing discrepancy between the all-inclusive ethical language of the rich and the elites and the dire economic reality of the "production floor" of society. The latter, excluded from financial and political power, rebel through figures like that of Trump against the ruling elite and its language; even so towards the language of "Human Rights" that was set supposedly to serve their cause at the bottom.

The logic of the Enlightenment, if we continue this line of thought, is no longer perceived as a liberating force of defiance against authority, but rather as a political and economic oppressive force that draws its power precisely from the same "Flat Global Logic." Here could figure, for example, equilibrium points of game-theory models that are

used to justify states of affairs of blatant inequality as if they were laws of nature; refusing them is to refuse logic (or the very nature of economy).

The Age of Reason: "1984" and the "Newspeak"

We will confront here the dilemma of our times from a new angle: that of the logical-philosophical discussion of analytic philosophy of the 20th century. The central object of inquiry is that of the discussion in Meaning: what can be said about the meaning of the expressions of our language? What analysis or reconstruction is mandatory to secure understanding and preventing failures in communication? This is a discussion whose subjects of inquiry are indeed language and logic – logic appears here in the role of supra-linguistic grammar – but quick to follow is a discussion in truth and facts: for what is factual truth if not the realization of meaning-commitments that are made in language?

This discussion in logic, language, truth, and facts becomes increasingly complex and perplexing the more closely one examines it. It appears on political stage with great force, all the more with the beginning of Trump's tenure. What are facts and what are alternative facts? What is news and what are fake news? Who – in an analogy to the printing of money or the minting of coins – is in a position of authority to “mint” facts? What meaning-commitment, for example, truly lies behind Trump's famous election promise to build a wall on the Mexico-US border?

It is no wonder, then, that in the months following Trump's election, the book that rose to the top of the sales charts is "1984" by George Orwell. In his masterpiece Orwell introduces the idea of a new language calculus, the "Newspeak." The “Newspeak” is a

politically perfect language designed by the ruling party of “Big Brother.” Its end-goal is a language whose use is obligatory, so not only will citizens speak Newspeak, but they will also think and act the dictate of the new language. To quote a member of the overseeing “Newspeak” party committee: *“only the disciplined mind can see reality.”* The disciplined mind speaks Newspeak.

A deeper look at the constitutive logic of "Newspeak" must therefore induce with us some discomfort and raise the following question: Is not the language of political correctness, the language of the global and “flat world,” more fully compatible with the idea of "Newspeak" than the rolling, instinctive and so often irresponsible language of Trump himself, and in general of the opponents of the "flat logic"?

Here is, in words taken from “1984,” an explanation of the rationale behind the "Newspeak" revolution:

So, the revolution will be complete when the language is perfect?

[Yes], the secret is to move from translation to direct thought, to automatic response. ⁴

It is well known that in the race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton to the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, it was Clinton who, in a wonderful viral YouTube video that garnered millions of views, was portrayed as Big Brother dictating a perfect language; a language in which the barriers between translation and direct thought and automatic response fall one after the other. The "perfect" language that Clinton speaks

4. The question is posed by the protagonist of the book. The colleague answering him is a member of the Newspeak committee. He shares with the protagonist his enthusiasm over the creation of the new dictionary, a new and updated language calculus, that is in synched with the most up-to-date science and the spirit of the totalitarian society controlled by Big Brother.

in that video is not seen as a liberating language, designed to serve the pressing needs of the people, but as a language of oppression. In that clip, built on an Apple commercial from 1984, the people in prison uniforms are freed from the control of the oppressive, perfect language of Clinton in the role of Big Brother, and we are informed that electing Barak Obama will ensure that 2008 will not become 1984.

So, who is "Big Brother" and what is the new, oppressive speech? Is this really the new speech bureaucracy of political correctness and of the flat logic of the forces of globalization? In the spirit of Karl Marx, according to whom the world is ruled by a "conspiracy without a conspirator," the new speech bureaucracy of political correctness may be perceived as an oppressive apparatus, perhaps without a literal "big brother," but one that is supervised by committees-of-sort of meaning-experts and censors of language; the latter can also be said to be serving economic interests and goals of global elites, businessmen, politicians, perhaps columnists of leading press such as the *New York Times*, elite Academia, World Bank economists, appointees of international human rights organizations and etc. – the circle of people that we may associate with the prestigious Davos Forum. Alternatively, is the newspeak of more literal "Big Brothers", who take the form of authoritative or authoritarian leaders shaping language and reality, facts and alternative facts, according to their wishes and their local and varying goals – more appropriate as an analogy to Orwell's "1984" prophesy?

What is now being re-invoked for discussion, therefore, are fundamental questions of language, meaning, truth, and facts – or perhaps the most fundamental question of the very possibility of literal meaning. This time, however, this logical-formal debate takes a dramatic political and geopolitical turn. For example, as soon as Trump was elected, Reince

Priebus, the former White House chief of staff, was quick to make the distinction between those whose use of language is *literal* – so apparently, in his view, the liberal enemy speaks – and those who speak *seriously*, as his president speaks. Literal speech is one that has a tight, rule-oriented commitment, but is empty and repressive, a bit like a tailor-made tender – so hints Priebus. To speak seriously, on the other hand, may mean to take lightly the logical chains of a commitment to literal meaning and precisely because of that to be able to make serious and responsible use of language, directed at real political action.

The importance of the latter distinction should not be underestimated. It mimics another, incredibly significant distinction, the distinction between the *literal* and the *real*, between compliance with literal conceptual definitions to that of the encounter with what is truly real. For those who are familiar with the "The Matrix" trilogy, this difference will surely be reminiscent of the juicy steak that Cypher relishes on though he admittedly knows that it is a produce of the Matrix and not a real steak. The false steak is the literal steak. It complies to perfection with all literal taste definitions that the finest steaks' connoisseurs can provide but it is not a real. Cypher, sealing over the steak dinner a deal of betrayal, sums up this culinary-philosophical discussion with the well-known proclamation: Ignorance is Bliss.

The Age of Reason: Wittgenstein and the Illusion of the Ideal

To delve deeper into the subject matter at hand, we must turn to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein – perhaps the true hero of 20th century analytic philosophy (Wittgenstein an Austrian in birth who fought bravely on the side of the Central Powers in WWI, worked

and died in Cambridge, England, in 1951). At the heart of his work is a heroic struggle against the standard positivism that reigns supreme in the intellectual world of the West. Wittgenstein's discussion is in logic, language, meaning, truth, and facts. At heart, his work is of formal or logical nature, in the best tradition of analytic philosophy.

How, then, can a seemingly formal-technical discussion in logic hold the key to understanding the revolutionary political changes we are now witnessing?

In this sense, however, we must first admit that a logical-philosophical discussion is always present at the background of significant political changes. A logical perplexity seamlessly interwoven into the fabric of the life and politics of an era is destined sooner or later to show its hand. In analogy, we may think of it as a hidden destructive frequency that resonates through a historical era and that can ultimately bring on its demise. Suffice here is to reflect on the mythological story of the discovery of irrational numbers. Why, according to mythology, was the discovery of irrational numbers kept secret by the members of the Pythagorean school? It must be the case that the discovery was experienced as an acute logical-glitch – like the famous “glitch” of the Matrix – that threatens the very foundations of the epistemic structure they were laboring on; a founding element of which is the assumption that measures in our world can be given in terms of relations between natural or whole numbers. The logical breakdown is so severe that according to the mythological story, the Pythagorean who breaks with the group and discloses the kept secret is punished by the gods in drowning. A discovery seemingly belonging exclusively to the logical-mathematical sphere carries political significance that demands a merciless punishment.

It turns out that this holds true also of the story of the 20th century discussion of logic and its host of constitutive paradoxes, as they resonate in the way of life, practice, and the politics of liberal Western culture. What, then, is the crux of standard positivism and the 20th century philosophy of logic, at which Wittgenstein's criticism is directed?

Well, in a nutshell, the story of logic in the 20th century is the positivist attempt to first subject mathematics and subsequently natural language to a consistent and rigid set of semantic rules. This is sure an oversimplification, and yet we may think of this as an enterprise of formalization designed to subject human praxis, even as far as ethics, to a well-formalized, semantic system of rules. The motivation for this enterprise of “formalized correctness” carried by modern positivism is clear. It is a reformative move of correctness as viewed through the lenses of the “Ideal.” The quest for human communication and practice that rest on solid logical grounds such that they are secured of the imperfections and flaws of natural language and human practice – as these are inherently prone to error. ⁵

A well-known historical anecdote, described in beautifully written short book titled, *Wittgenstein's Poker*, ⁶ documents an encounter that takes place between Wittgenstein, a formidable intellectual figure in Cambridge before and after the war years (WWII), and the philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper. At the center of the discussion: Are there indeed

5. Here too, as in the Pythagorean project, the founding pillars of the logical program are threatened by a series of paradoxes that share the same structural character, from Kurt Gödel's famous Incompleteness Theorem to the Löwenheim-Skolem theorem and to the fundamental paradoxes of set theory such as that of Russell.

6. Wittgenstein's Poker, *The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers*, 2001, Authors, David Edmonds, John Eidinow.

major philosophical problems, a claim towards which Wittgenstein's position is categorical: Philosophical problems are nothing but logical confusions – pseudo-problems that arise, in Wittgenstein's phrasing, when language "goes on vacation." Popper holds the view that philosophical problems, even if not scientific, are still real problems that require a solution or an informative answer. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, thinks of "solving" these problems as an emancipatory activity set to free us of the shackles of the "picture that keeps us captive"; a picture that hinders our ability to see things as they are and act accordingly. The defining moment of the debate revolves around ethics. The positivist act of formalizing both language and practice does not stop short of ethics. Wittgenstein, who once claimed that if ever there was a book of ethics – say, a treatise consisting of well-formalized dictates of ethics – the library that houses the book would go up in fire, challenged Popper to come up with an ethical maxim for him while threateningly waving the charcoal poker of the fireplace. Popper was quick to respond to the challenge and offered the maxim, "Do not threaten visiting lecturers with pokers," prompting Wittgenstein to leave the room angrily with a door slam. Karl Popper may have shown wit but missed the depth of the discussion and the gist of Wittgenstein's attack on the reign of positivism and the arrogant confidence it exudes in the power of the mechanism of logical formalization that does not stop short even before the sacred gate of ethics.

Here is a key quote from Wittgenstein's "Philosophical Investigations." Its key idea is that in striving for perfection, toward the ideal conditions of correctness of communication, language, and logic, we may lose grip on reality and our ability to describe and shape it in a proper and responsible way:

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. – We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!⁷

A new understanding of Wittgenstein's revolutionary ideas and their translation into the logic of our times is an important and necessary challenge. For example, in positivism, a sentence in language can be seen as an expression in quotes such that a removal of the quotes transports us from language to reality: from the sentence to the objective fact it portrays. The translation from linguistic expression to factual reality is supposedly objective or, if we wish, politically neutral. Likewise, this would seem to hold true of an imperative, a command or, say, an election promise. The fundamental intuition is that of language as a mirror-image of reality. The American philosopher Richard Rorty describes in his celebrated book, "Philosophy and the mirror of nature," this conceptual thread as it runs through western philosophy way before modern positivism. However, if we depart from the mirror-image model or the illusion of the automatic translation of symbolic representations into the materials of reality, we will find ourselves stepping into a new vision for the relationships between language and practice, e.g. we will be required to offer a new understanding of how language acquires reality. This time not in the form of direct, supposedly automatic, translation in the spirit of "Newspeak," but as an action that has a creative character, that at the same time is neither distorting nor misleading. This is not a

7. Paragraph 107 in *Philosophical Investigations*.

simple challenge. But Wittgenstein in his work paved the essential logical steps required for us to be able to walk in this direction.

The model of positivist or liberal correctness, then, is nothing but an attempt to achieve those "ideal conditions" against which Wittgenstein warns us. They will lead us in the end-limit onto slippery ice and we will not be able to walk. Walking is a metaphor for meaningful communication and action. This is a recurring image in Wittgenstein's thought, according to which in the attainment of the so-called "ideal conditions," then, in the absence of *friction*, the cog-wheel that is designed to animate the space of meaning and action is unable to perform its task. It will resemble a cog-wheel in an "Idle" mode. The new political and geopolitical logic we must seek now is therefore the one that calls "friction" back in. We must now follow the logic of the "rough ground."

The Age of Reason: Political Correctness and the Conditions of Meaning

We are now at the end of an era governed by legal political correctness as a driving force. This is not just about the nature of public and political discourse but also about the way we judge the functioning of systems and organizations, as we assess them against conceived "ideal conditions" – in the drive for perfect compliance or convergence to an ideal endpoint. Think, for instance, of an effective and ideal army in that its soldiers are safe from harm. Such an army will naturally fail the test of its own constitutive identity, which is the protection of civilians. Similarly, an economic organization that sets its goals only around quantified calculation of loss and profit – as its shareholders may think – rather around the overall responsibility before whatever constitutes its identity, e.g. if this was the product it

manufactures and sells to the public. In this context, it is worth considering the words of Toyota's CEO, member of the founding family, who takes command of the company in times of crisis and offers this as concise analysis of what went wrong: "We have transformed from a car-making company to a money-making company." His insight enabled the company to resume its place as the world's leading car manufacturer. There is no doubt that the 2008 economic crisis was characterized by this fundamental confusion, since the distinction between (speculative) profit and (real) value or, in a broader sense, between "success" and real achievement, was completely obliterated. The perfect, literal steak however false, that Cypher relishes on in *The Matrix* in return for betraying his comrades, wins over the real steak of the "rough ground."

A deeper look at the logical structure underpinning the discussion in the "ideal" is warranted here. What we actually have in the "ideal" is a working normative model applicable within a guarded locality in a disguise of universal applicability. The model of western liberal democracy, together with its set of associated values, is a timely example for a working model that claims universality. This in fact is the gist of Fukuyama's thesis of us arriving at the gates of the ultimate political model and hence the end of history. The "ideal," we may sum up, is a local abstraction claiming in an *a-priori* fashion a universal normative force. This obviously will lend the already practitioners in the guarded locality an unfair advantage in any possible dealings with localities that are now required to subscribe to the "ideal." In Wittgenstein's language, the measuring-rod that purports to be "ideal" or "perfect" is nothing but "private" and as such loses its ability to fulfill its purpose or the use for which it was designed – think of a private clock ticking private time, refusing

to negotiate time-determination with the clocks of others. This will not work as base of synchronization within a community.⁸

Here also lies the crux of the postmodern critique of modernity. In Wittgenstein, we can find the logical artillery required to secure this critique from allegations that it inevitably leads to moral relativism or anything-goes type of attitude. The opposite is in fact true. Immanuel Kant is known to testify that he was awakened from his dogmatic slumber by reading David Hume. It is now appropriate to be awakened from a new dogmatic slumber: the picture of reason and rationality as universal super-rigid machines, to borrow a phrasing from Wittgenstein, that demand literal compliance rather than creative translation. In this we revert back to the true premise, and promise, of the age of reason: *autonomous reason* as an emancipatory power that can anchor human praxis in the world. We may add here, on a humorous note, that Kant on the *autonomy of reason* was replaced in our times with an awe before the idea of the *autonomous machine*.⁹

Political correctness as a driving force of human practice must be a thing of the past. It sits on an essentially positivist disposition that has lost touch with the historical or material preconditions of meaning. A predetermined, *a-priori* logical anchoring of meanings must give way to an *a-posteriori* rediscovery of meanings through the lenses of the changing circumstances where the meanings of our words and deeds must anchor. The formalized correctness of modern positivism, whose banner is modern logic, translated into a culture of doctrinaire legal political correctness. This, as explained, is nothing but the

8. For a detailed discussion of the “ideal” measuring-rod, see my paper “The Standard Metre in Paris,” *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 31, 2008.

9. I think, for example, in this context of Elon Musk and his various statements on the subject of AI.

expropriation of western liberal form of life and framing it within a binding, bureaucratic, dogmatic scheme and in the name of universality imposing it on diverse cultures and practices. Again, to go cynical, enemies of political correctness, will liken the logical predicament described here as that of the community of Zebras imposing their form of life on the community of Lions in the name of moral progress.

Even liberal sacred concepts like “Human Rights” will no longer enjoy political immunity. "Human Rights" can be now re-approached as the product of a local abstraction of a concrete form of life – say, western-liberal communities of relative economic prosperity – that in the name of universal validity gives itself an unfair advantage in interacting economically or otherwise with other communities.¹⁰ The leading slogan of American universities, "diversity is a value" is telling in this context. It in fact invokes, under the guise of generosity towards the diversity of colors, ethnicities, and lifestyles, a hidden preference for the base color of white. White, supposedly an equal member of the family of colors, is in fact the base color that lies underneath all other colors. The “other” is colored, the “one” that all are measured against is white.

10. Just think of a formative concept with which every child in American culture grows up, and that is the concept of "personal space," an imaginary boundary space drawn around every citizen, the invasion of which is an act that can be defined as violent. Only recently, in remarks leading up to the publication of her book, did Hillary Clinton talk about how Trump, during the main televised confrontation between them, encroached upon her “personal space.” Interestingly, as it happened, Clinton did not find the mental capacity to block by speech or gesturing Trump's undoubtedly bullying behavior. Yet the very idea of such a "personal immunity space" that prevents friction and collision between people, requires a spacious physical environment. Such a space would not be suitable for societies of families with many children and tribal populations who inevitably live in overcrowding conditions.

* The current Corona crisis has again invoked this idea through the demand for maintaining a “social distance” as a real space of immunity that prevents possible viral transmission. The less crowded societies are naturally more protected.

This brings us to the "politics of representation" and its flagship mechanism of "affirmative action" designed to close the gap for the under-represented "colors." The inherent fallacy of "affirmative action" is that it promotes "professional representatives," players whose craft is "representation" and not the cause of the discipline they serve. The outcome is counterproductive in that it deepens the gap since it does not promote the true emancipatory powers and talents of the under-represented. In this respect, "affirmative action" is not different from the old colonial practice of sidelining emancipatory leaders of the colonized society for a carefully chosen selection of collaborative representatives. True political leadership of the colonized society is thereby blocked and the colonial rule can be thus prolonged.

Even the literal understanding of the value of "equality" should now come into question. The philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote many years ago that the error of our time lies in the way we inadvertently replaced the concept of "equality" with "sameness." The retirement age for women and men cannot be literally the same, since the material conditions with which men and women, fathers, and mothers, are coping with are different. The true expression of "equality" as it pertains to retirement age for men and women should therefore be not read literally but be indexed, e.g. we may find that 67 in men equals 63 in women. In a research institute for democracy, where sacred practice over discussion roundtable is 3 minutes on the clock speaking-slot, should not equality dictate a generous, additional 1 minute more to a nonnative speaker or a speaker who stutters? ¹¹

11. No recommendation meant here to formalize the additional 1-minute speaking-time to the nonnative speaker into a binding rule; otherwise, we are back into the vain attempt to formalize praxis to the letter.

The pursuit in the name of equality of a common core of identity, a constitutive common denominator is at the heart of the fallacy we explore here. We have already noted of "diversity is a value" that it presupposes a tacit common denominator. Instead of looking for a common cross-sectional core, we need to think in terms of the completing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Pieces of the jigsaw by definition do not share a common core as they instead complete each other to form a meaningful picture. The value of equality is therefore rightfully expressed not in us being subjected to a common core but rather through partnership in a creation of a picture: a shared project, be it national, ideological, or any other conceivable human project. To resort to philosophy, we may say that all shades of the color red do not share a common red as they rather complete to create the family of the red color.¹² Equality is in complementary partnership. In being true contributing players, partnering together, each player brings in his or her singular complementary contribution, that we become equal.

The value of equality as expressed today in liberal culture may best be phrased by the oxymoron of "Standard Individualism." In subscribing to the "standard" we presumably secure the values of "Equality" as well as that of "Human Rights." However, put in this fashion, it would be hard for the "Individual" not to sense the full restrictive and oppressive character of the "Standard." The astute Viennese journalist of the early 20th century, Karl Krauss, expressed similar ideas in his columns at a different historical moment, with the disintegration of the bureaucratic order of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This is what he writes on "Human Rights": "When there were no human rights, the unique

12. Think in this context of Wittgenstein celebrated concept of "Family Resemblance."

individual had human rights. This was inhuman. Then the value of equality was created, and human rights were taken from the unique individual."

The question arises as to the extent to which we are now in a similar historical moment, that of the disintegration of the old liberal order and with it the era of political correctness with its hidden bureaucracy of meaning – however abstract and therefore less visible than the old order of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy to which Krauss refers.

The Age of Reason: Media, Judgement and the “Liberal Fallacy”

The place and status of the media must also be questioned. Plato famously was apprehensive of the corrupting power of art. In retrospect we can defend Plato's position and say that he feared the corrupting power of bad art. But Plato goes so far as to express the concern that even a wonderful poet like Homer, standing in front of an audience thirsty for his poetic descriptions of Achilles' exploits, may err and think he himself is Achilles or even that he can surpass Achilles. Reflecting on the mega-celebrity status of actors and actresses that overshadows by far that of the protagonists they play, we may find Plato not far from the mark. This may also hold true of the media vis-a-vis the praxis of life and politics that is the subject of their reporting. The media of our times with the reach of power it holds is in danger of falling into the arrogance alluded to by Plato. It may err and regards its protagonists, political leaders, generals, leaders of industry and economy and men and women of action in general, as merely extras in a plot where they are in fact the authors and true protagonists. When the very ethos of action and respect to real-life protagonists is undermined up to ridicule in the name of critical review that the mood of the “production

floor” of society may turn against the media and the coverage it offers. The people at the “production floor” that feel exploited and excluded from the socio-economic power game may then turn to irresponsible populist leaders that cynically nourish their rage.

So is the wind of moralistic retrospective judgment that blows through the media and the liberal circles in relation to past heroes. See the commotion surrounding the smashing of the General Robert Lee monument, commander of the army of the American South, the Confederate Army, during the American Civil War. The same wind is blowing in many other places in our tumultuous world, from the shattering of ancient pagan monuments by ISIS in the Syrian civil war and elsewhere to, in contrast, New York City municipality, which is seriously considering, following a liberal protest, whether the statue of Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of America, should be left standing. Political correctness judges the past in semantic categories that are not materially available to the people and protagonists of the past – it is somewhat like requiring past figures to pay in the currencies of our time. We can safely assume that General Ulysses Grant, General Lee's contemporary who led the fighting against him, would not have joined this righteous protest campaign and would have been happy to see his opponent's statue intact. It is especially ironic that this judgmental state of mind – preoccupied with purifying the past of figures that do not retroactively stand up to the stern criteria of our current lifestyle – is reminiscent of the Soviet *modus operandi*, ridiculed in the West, in which official documents and photographs were cleared of any evidence of the existence of senior officials who had been purged from power positions.

The spirit of judgmental political correctness that has taken over the reading of history is dangerous. More than anything, it causes us to miss the encounter with history

as it actually occurred, with its people and its protagonists as well as with the material circumstances they faced. It is a mindset afflicted with a simplistic description of history as if the latter were a chain of unnecessary disasters instigated by irresponsible leaders. The historian becomes a judge and the historical research becomes the gathering of evidence to substantiate the guilt or innocence of the protagonist. Against what, we must ask ourselves, does the standard-setting historian-judge assess and evaluate the actual course of history? He or she can assess it only against an ideal standard, that is, political "ideal conditions," borrowed from today's material circumstances. These take the form of a counter-factual historical trajectory, against which actual history does indeed seem to be one continuous anomaly and its protagonists therefore may be seen as criminals.

This judgmental and moralistic mindset is part of the postcolonial ethos that now dominates the hallways of Western academia and media. At the heart of this mood is a particularly simplistic and critical reading of history and especially of the colonial past of the West, to which in many ways the West owes its current power and status in world affairs. Behind this intellectual state of mind lies the assumption that there is an "ideal" point of reference, sometimes even perhaps in the form of a pre-colonial, natural state, a return to which represents justice; this, in a non-coincidental analogy to an utopian conception of nature and the environment, before the massive human environmental intervention of the Industrial Revolution.¹³

13. Discussion of climate and the contribution of human intervention to global warming is definitely a reference point in this space, and therefore there is no wonder that it has become a political issue and the target of attacks by skeptical conservatives, e.g., such as Trump. In Europe, too, it is interesting how skepticism over the European Union's project merges, as it often does, with skepticism over global warming as a result of human activity.

A similar case can be made in relation to the idea of progress and the inadvertent replacement of the concept of technological or structural-political progress with the idea of moral progress. It can be said that for the standard liberal, progress is in the construction of political and social life designed in such a fashion so that the very idea of friction, the coping with the necessity of resolving moral dilemmas, will become a matter of the past. This is a nonsensical idea according to which, complying with the moral imperative is an *a priori* attempt to construct a structured way of life so that the moral dilemma cannot come into being to begin with. In a crude analogy to simplistic ethics discussions in youth movements: if you are on a plane that must be abandoned with 20 people on board and only 19 parachutes, what should you do?! *The simplistic liberal thinks of a world and an ideal way of life in which the ethical parachutes are already packed and prepared in advance for all the passengers of the plane.*¹⁴

The frustration therefore of the standard liberal is with the very emergence of the moral dilemma. In analogy to a mathematical problem with no solution, the liberal observes the moral dilemma as having no “correct” resolution, but that it could and in fact should have been prevented from coming into being. (*e.g. that there should have been 20 parachutes on board!*)

However this may be true that we all prefer having enough *ethical parachutes*, the moral dilemma will always cross our path. The standard liberal will find in this entanglement an excuse not to act but find fault in a structural malfunction of the socio-

14. * Substitute medical ventilators and in general the saving-life equipment required to treat acute Covid patients for well-packed parachutes and you get the picture of the state of the heated critical debate at the outbreak of Covid-19.

political system that is responsible for the dilemma. Fault must be that of past generations or of others; the liberal thereof is excused. To this logical predicament, we better reserve the term: “The Liberal Fallacy.”

The Rough ground: From Literal Repetition to Material Expansion

The logic of “the rough ground,” on contrary, must center on friction and in renewed confrontation with the moral dilemma. The moral dilemma – in the deepest sense any political or geopolitical decision is a dilemma of a moral nature – will not confirm to established mold and will therefore constantly require a novel resolution of an expansive nature, in which the concepts and values demonstrated in exemplary past stories are translated and reformulated in the material conditions of the present. This synthetic expansion of the past has a creative and expanding nature and is not a response that is literal, formal, or legal in nature.

The standard or the failed liberal is guided by an image of a consistent world, as if it is structured through a web of rules that cohere in marvelous consistency. But this marvelous consistency of world orders and worldviews is the result of a resolution of those for whom, at the moment of encounter with reality, reality was a web of paradoxical entanglements of rules, values, and facts, colliding and threatening to cancel each other. The well-known quantum physicist Nils Bohr claimed that every encounter with a paradox is an encounter with hope – hope for progress by means of resolution. Not so for the failed liberal. For he or she this excuses their inaction on the merit that there is no course of action that can qualify as right. This in analogy is like those whose court manners are impeccable

until they recognize a threat, however slight, on their position and status. In this they feel excused from showing manners, for they feel good manners are a matter of days of calm rather than times of conflict and struggle. The truth is to the contrary, manners and values are tested first and foremost during conflict. "Culture of war," for example, is not an oxymoron or an internal contradiction – on the contrary, it is the true test of every culture, together with its founding rules and values.

To conclude, we will have to acknowledge that there is no historical point of reference of "natural justice" to which one must return and not a just template that is ready-made to be implemented. But rather a forward movement that reinvents itself time and time again and is guided by past events and sorrows, along with the logic and constraints of today's "realpolitik" that demand of us a fair and just resolution. We must give up on the logic of a non-temporal, formal response to a template or the logic of repetition: the logic of reverse-engineering the past and supposedly rectifying it of its crimes – *an ethos driven by the fear of falling into the tragedies of the past more than the courage to be worthy of its greatness* – as a misguided key to the building of the future.

When I discussed all this at a European research institute only recently, one of the quick-witted attendees offered his branding of the system of concepts I used with the phrase: "Bismarck with an iPhone." This is precisely in the sense of an approach to shaping the future that forgoes the erroneous logic of repetition and instead adopts a logic that does not evade the necessity of material friction in the renewed building of the future – in the creative, self-reinventing translation of exemplary values carried out by exemplary protagonists of the past in the material constraints and the technological tools of the present.

It was Noam Chomsky who once said that: “we shouldn’t be looking for heroes, we should be looking for good ideas.” It hard to think of a better representative of liberal dogmatism, with which we are debating in this paper, than Noam Chomsky. In rebuking Chomsky, I think we could safely acknowledge that there is not a single good idea in human history that was not carried out or exemplified through the life of a hero or a heroine. These are the protagonists that battle through the “rough grounds” of their times and that in standing up to their greatness, we are summoned now by history to carry the baton forward. Since our subject here was the age of reason and its future, I think it would be only appropriate to conclude with the words of a giant protagonist of reason, Sir Isaac Newton, expressing his own debt and owe before the past: “If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.”

*** A Coronavirus Summary Note:**

I cannot conclude this essay, the main point of which is the understanding that the old liberal order must make way for a new order, without referring to the Corona crisis. This crisis holds an essential mirror up to the old liberal order. We can imagine it as a frequency of a historic disruption, well-calibrated to undermine the old order, as if the latter were a suspension bridge that a storm collapses by activating a unique frequency. When I described the logical cracks opening up in the foundations of the old liberal order, I did not dwell on an implication of the "illusion of the ideal" which concerns a risk-averse mindset. I have lingered long on this aspect of the risk economy of the old liberal order in my book

Logic in Action (2012).¹⁵ For our purposes here, it is important to understand that the more powerful is the liberal categorical, retrospective judgment – a judgment equipped with *post-factum* wisdom that is blind to the material conditions of the criticized protagonists – the greater is the systemic weakness to act courageously toward an expansive and non-literal fashioning of the future. The corollary is indeed a mindset of *risk aversion* that rewards players who do not take risks and punishes the brave ones who do take risks; if you will, it encourages the profiteers of words and of financial, short term bottom-lines rather than the people of action and the value creators. This process, by its very nature, by force of internal inertia, intensifies to the point of inevitable discharge and collapse of the kind we have already encountered in the 2008 crisis. The risk economy to which the Corona crisis has plunged the world will therefore necessitate the construction of a new model, which forgoes the illusion of control in the name of the ideal, and instead foster the creation of a new culture of a shared risk taking, in thought as well as in action.

At the time Donald Trump was elected to the presidency on November 2016, I was attending with a few of my colleagues a political seminar on the politics of the Middle East at Jimmy Carter’s presidential library in Atlanta. Discussing with the president, who oversaw the great diplomatic and geopolitical feat of achieving a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, was an enlightening and instructive experience. On issues of the day, the liberal president was clearly distraught by the surprising turn of events of Hilary losing the election and him needing instead to congratulate Donald Trump on his victory. In the discussion that ensued on diplomacy and geopolitics, I did stress before the president that “declarative diplomacy,” as I put it, had run its course. I meant by this that the kind of

¹⁵ Doron Avital, *Logic in Action*, Kineret Zemorah-Bitan, 2012.

diplomacy and doing geopolitics that is derived from abstract and *a priori* principles, must give way, in the spirit of the ideas of this paper, to 21st century type of “realpolitik” – the kind of which I was trying to capture with the phrasing of “Bismarck with an iPhone.”

I was stressing the gap between abstractions taken literally, posing as an “ideal,” and the real world with its real woes that cry for our attention. The president was intrigued though there was not enough time for us to develop the ideas much further. But this discussion brings home once again the acuteness of the widening gap between the world of verbal possibilities – the verbal announcements – and their translation into the world of action. If not the abstract principles, I was alluding to in the discussion with the president, then we have now the online immediacy of text and in general the inflation of verbal declarative expressions. As you do with inflating the value of a currency by flooding the market with it – this in concrete terms is yet to be seen in our economies – so do the space of verbal communication loses in value with respect to the world of actuality, up to the point where it cannot anymore animate it in a meaningful fashion.

Awareness of this gap between word and deed, between the online immediacy of the text and the space of actuality, is now necessary. Therefore, vigilance with regard to dramatic surprises is also necessary. Lack of coordination between, on the one hand, the steering wheels and controllers of systems in the hands of leaders, and on the other hand, the actual movements of vessels, in analogy to the political systems of our world, is a recipe for colossal disasters. Will we now, in the wake of the global crisis of change in world-order, and the acceleration of processes caused by the Corona crisis, be required to face another series of mega-crises?

The great Roman sage Seneca wondered in his book "On the Shortness of Life," "Can anything be more idiotic than certain people who boast of their foresight?" I will not propose, therefore, a forecast for the future, but rather, in Michel Foucault's terminology, as I have tried to do in this paper, offer a penetrating look into the dynamics of the history of the present.