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***'The social scientific study of rationality'  
Response to Joseph Agassi***

In his comment on my essay on the rationality of extremists, Joseph Agassi has sought, first, to explain the theoretical framework in which my research has taken place, second, to use this explanation to appraise the results of my research, which he finds of some value, and third, to determine what consequences it may have for good or effective reactions to extremism today. In regard to the first task he describes the theoretical background of contemporary social scientific research. He then interprets my own research program as a response to the establishment's discussion of established programs. This is, however, a far too narrow portrayal of how my research developed: it is in fact a theoretical response to fallibilist versions of research in the social science, including Agassi's, which I regard as defective. Agassi ignores this crucial aspect of my research. After erroneously portraying my research of extremism as a mere addition to examples given by himself and Jarvie and in accord with their program, he turns to the second task of appraising my work. In this appraisal he limits his descriptions of my contributions to specific additions to the understanding of extremists, without any new view of rationality as social, as I have maintained it is. He places my work, however, deeply in conventional discussions of rationality, including fallibilist ones. He ignores the fact that have I sought to improve such views by adding to them the importance of studies of the social impact of established theories of rationality; this addition is needed in order to overcome difficulties they face. In regard to the third task, he seeks to draw consequences from my research about what it might say about the task of overcoming extremism today. This third task seems, of course, a worthy exercise; but there is no guarantee of progress. In this case his discussion goes a bit awry, because there are differences between Agassi's view of how rationality is and/or should be studied, on the one hand, and my view of such matters, on the other hand. In my reply, then, I wish to spell out some differences between our views of the research of rationality, which have consequences for (1) the understanding and appraisal of my work, (2) the consequences for the appraisal of extremism given my work and (3) the ability we might have of limiting the social impact of extremism.

**1. How Agassi sets his problems**

Agassi's comment starts with a seemingly simple and easily accepted, albeit quite general, purported description of the place of my research in today's intellectual context. I investigate. Agassi says, 'rationality'. But, there are many differing ways of investigating various aspects of rationality, he here takes no notice of such differences. He further says, that I begin with a principle, that action is always explained as the outcome of some 'rational' decision. There are, of course, many ways of reading this 'principle', which I never stated in my essay. Though I do hold that all directed action can be partially explained by the partial rationality of the acting persons, this is significantly more limited statement than that which Agassi attributes to me. But to complain all too seriously at this point my very well be too quick. I might note, however, that Agassi simply ignores my own explanations of how my research

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program fits in today's intellectual context and of its relation to historical and contemporary alternatives. My own explanation is presented in my essay, but, without explaining why, he substitutes his own, contrary alternative explanation, with no mention of mine.

## **2. Agassi's portrayal of theoretical problems about social scientific research without fallibilism today.**

Agassi proceeds by describing what he takes to be central problems of the social scientific investigation of 'rationality' today. The three problems he mentions have, indeed, played significant roles in the history of social scientific methodology up until the present. The first problem he mentions is whether all rational action is successful action. This is an unfortunate problem, which results from traditional theories of rationality as proof. If all rationality is proof, then all rational action must be successful: it is based on proven assumptions. Of course I reject this assumption that rationality is only possible, when proof is possible. Having long ago decided, on which side of this issue I stand, it has played no important role in the development of my research.

The second problem which Agassi portrays is whether rational actions can take into account, as causal factors of the making of decisions, social conditions in which decisions occur. Of course they can; but this point, although Agassi portrays it as avant-garde, is hardly questioned by anyone. In some social scientific research it is merely conflated with portrayals of the selection of problems.

The third dispute is whether the rationality principle can be applied to societies, that is, can actions of societies be deemed rational, because they are the outcome of rational decisions? As stated here, this question is once again quite vague. Agassi does not explain here what counts as a rational decision. Popper had, indeed, two theories of rationality. One was a mere version of methodological individualism: all individuals are rational in the sense that they act on the basis of their beliefs, their aims and the logic of their situations. Popper quite correctly separates this theory of rational action from his second theory of rationality as the pursuit of truth: all rationality is critical and without justification. Agassi slides from one to the other without explaining just what is meant. I have argued elsewhere that Popper's two-sided approach to rationality is a mistake: the rational actions of individuals are highly influenced by competing theories of rationality as the pursuit of truth, and these are, of course, quite often quite misguided. Agassi also does not explain whether a social decision can be deemed a rational decision of a society, when it is the product of a collection of individual rational decisions, but nevertheless quite unsuccessful. But we can here leave these questions aside to turn to Agassi's portrayal of my approach to the investigation of rationality.

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**3. Is my study of the connection between rationality and extremism one further example of Agassi's and Jarvie's normative studies of the rationality of dogmatism and irrationality, or is it part of a competing research program in the social sciences, which studies the social influence of established theories of rationality due to their influence on how individuals think?**

My approach to the study of rationality is, according to Agassi, avant-garde, but no innovation. Whereas the traditional established theory of rational actions views aims, pursued by individuals, as given, as exogenous, I observe that they are to a high degree socially determined. Social scientists do quite regularly take aims as given, but they often do not bother to ask to what degree they are socially determined. In the past there have been, of course, thinkers such as Gunnar Myrdahl who have developed such views and 'keeping up with the Jones' has, for example, been much discussed. Perhaps such considerations are less intensively studied today than they once were, but they keep turning up in political analyses and in political-cum-economic analyses. From an historical point of view Weber's theory of the rise of capitalism as a product of the adherence of individuals to the socially established Calvinist ethics is such an example.

When Agassi describes the view, according to which social conditions play a role in determining rational action, which he regards as avant-garde, he leaves aside that important aspect of it, which I regard as my own innovation: established theories of rationality determine to a degree how people think. There is no virtually universal human thought process as is presumed by methodological individualism. Whatever general psychological basis for thought there is, this basis is always combined by individuals with other factors and these varying combinations lead to significant variances in individual thought processes. Examining, how individuals steer their directed thought processes, and what the consequences of their approaches are, pose new and important tasks for the social sciences. One way one erroneous theory of rationality influences thought processes is the connection I have described between it and extremism.

We then, says Agassi, come to the question: What is the rationality of extremism? This problem, Agassi claims, gains import, because extremists may change their extremist views, thus they make decisions which are not rational. Individualists then turn, he suggests, to psychological explanations as alternative explanations of extremism. They deny the role of social factors. But we should ask what social conditions lead to extremism, as I have advocated.

The trouble that Agassi sees here, is that rationality does not as yet help us avoid extremism. He proceeds, then, to offer his own, above all psychological conjectures about the attraction of extreme views, and attraction which he even finds in physics. He also provides an explanation of how the adherence to extremism, when it seems to fail, can be maintained. When it fails, the sacrifice that has been made can be said not to have been thorough enough. (I do note this in my essay.) Baconian philosophy, Agassi reminds us, illustrates such a procedure.

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I find this observation quite insightful and useful. But the shift which Agassi makes from the application of theories of rationality as a social factor which encourages extremism to psychological factors as their real cause goes too far: many psychological factors can be, and often are, combined with the use of a traditionally established, but nevertheless, erroneous theories of rationality; and these combinations can cause and shape extremist views in various contexts. The fact that the use of a traditional theory of rationality can be combined with the adoption of various extreme positions is no sign of its unimportance for any.

What does the example of Baconian doctrine blocking the avoidance of an extreme view show about my research? On Agassi's view it shows that rationality alone does not suffice to avoid a kind of trap, which keeps individuals in extremist positions even when their actions, guided by their extremist views, go awry. But this is not what I claim. I have argued that the established theory of rationality not only does not suffice to avoid such a trap, but even creates conditions which encourage its occurrence. But this does not show that rationality, when correctly understood, does not avoid the trap, which Agassi discusses. I offer a social analysis of one bad consequence of the application of the traditional, erroneous view of rationality. This consequence is due to the fact that this theory mistakenly demands comprehensive thought processes. This consequence requires a change in the theory of rationality, and not merely the correction of some misguided applications of it. Agassi does explain that I do point to confusions about rationality, and agrees with this observation.

Agassi claims that rationality does not suffice to avoid a trap of extremism. He sees this trap as a special case of what Popper called 'reinforced dogmatism', thereby negating any claim by me to have viewed the connection between rationality and extremism in some original theoretical way, as opposed to merely finding a new example of Popper's theoretical observation. But it is not true that rationality, when properly conceived as critical, does not suffice to avoid a trap of extremism. It does do that. It is only when rationality is erroneously conceived, as it is on the standard view, that it does not do that. I am really not sure about this; it seems that Agassi flip-flops between the two views.

Agassi says further that he and I.C. Jarvie, in accord with Popper's observation of what he called 'reinforced dogmatism', tried to square rationality with dogmatism. Thereby they give a degree of rationality, conceived of as the pursuit of truth, to intellectual strategies, which Popper would have simply viewed as irrational. Agassi does not here mention that they argued that rationality can have degrees, and that even dogmatism or irrationality can have rational aspects, that is, can be judged to be, even if to a small degree, an exercise in rationality. This nice. But this is only then possible, when rationality is properly described as critical. I did not venture into this endeavor.

My discussion of the rationality of extremism should, on Agassi's interpretation of it, be a mere addition of one further example to the discussion already developed by himself and Jarvie: Agassi suggests that I add a new example to the list of cases of limited rationality, that Popper began, and that he and Jarvie have already significantly developed. Agassi suggests that I explain the rationality of extremism, that is, I explain how extremism meets to some,

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even if to some low degree, the standards of rationality as properly conceived, that is, as critical. The analyses of Agassi and Jarvie are fine results. But my discussion of the linkage between a traditional theory of rationality and extremism was by no means intended to add any new such analysis of partial rationality to extremists, which Agassi and Jarvie had offered of dogmatism and irrationalism. I did not show that extremists were, in fact, to some degree rational, when judged from the point of view of some correct theory of rationality. I merely wanted to explain how some extremists think that they are rational, because they observe that their extremism conforms to an erroneous, but socially accepted, standard of rationality. The evaluation of the degree to which they might be rational in accord with some theory of rationality accepted as a norm, is a different problem. But even here I think there is a more important problem concerning the degree of rationality brought about by specific social standards of rationality. This is not a traditional question such as that posed by Agassi and Jarvie of the degree of rationality of some thought processes used by individuals when judged by the normative theory of rationality as critical, but rather the degree of rationality of discussions between individuals, who adhere to specific canons of rational thought..

Agassi ends this portion of his comment with a discussion of the problem, how do we explain how extremism often wins influence? The reason for the influence of extremism, Agassi says, is that individuals choose to meet the highest possible standards in order to achieve the best possible result. This is a quite general attraction, says Agassi. I presume he views this attraction to be a universal psychological trait, though I do not. The explanation that the attraction of extremism is due to the psychological fact that all humans try to meet the highest possible standard does not depend on some erroneous theory of rationality, such as my analysis of some extremists does. It is, Agassi also notes, very hard to recommend lowering standards, and this recommendation is needed to fight the persistence of extremism. This is true, but a different problem, than that problem which I have investigated.

#### **4. Talmon's social analysis of rationality**

Insofar as he goes in his description of my analysis of Talmon, Agassi describes my position very nicely; there is little of significance to criticize in his portrayal. There is, however, something rather important to add. On my view Talmon's description of the social consequences of the Enlightenment revolution presumes that this revolution properly followed what is, in fact, an erroneous theory of rationality. And Talmon himself follows that same established and erroneous theory of rationality, which some extremists use to rationalize their views. Tolman's use of this erroneous theory as a framework for his research leads him, first, to mistaken appraisals of the limits of rationality, then, to erroneous conclusions about the seeming inevitable historical development of the Enlightenment into totalitarian political systems, and finally to his unhappy social and political analyses of Israel.

#### **5. Explaining and fighting extremism**

In the last two paragraphs of his commentary Agassi turns to the problem of explaining the prevalence of extremism today, a problem my essay really does not touch on, and which it was not intended to explain. His explanation is that extremism is simple, and that this is a factor of its appeal. But, whether this explanation explains the extent of extremism is rather

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dubious, since many other factors are in play. Just how and when which factors and to how high a degree are influential in which societies pose serious social scientific problems. Agassi notes, that I note, that it is hard to demand the lowering of standards. (That rationality can be improved by lowering standards is a significant contribution of Agassi to the discussion of rationality, which he has made elsewhere.) This difficulty of demanding the lowering of standards or rationality is real; it is very difficult to change the established theory of rationality. (A significant change in this direction frightened even Bertrand Russell; for that reason he refused to budge in regard to his demand for justification in the theory of rationality, which, he openly conceded, had not been obtained.) Changing the established theory of rationality to theories of rationality as critical should remove one contemporary aspect of some extremist developments. How important this significant aspect of some extremism today is for extremism in general is an open question, rather than a cause for increased optimism about contemporary political developments.