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**RATIONAL
CONSCIOUSNESS
IN THE LABYRINTH
OF CULTURAL PLURALITY**
A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME
TO REDISCOVER THE WESTERN
VOCATION FOR DIALOGUE





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INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of the pronounced multiplicity of cultural traditions that constitute the landscape of the contemporary world, the identity marker which, in the global collective imagination, defines Western civilization is its potentially boundless trust in rational thought. This orientation has demonstrated its practical effectiveness over time, having enabled Europe and the United States in particular to attain major achievements in scientific and technological development that have decisively enhanced the quality of life of their populations, while simultaneously producing significant positive effects within the juridical and social spheres.

Indeed, the profound understanding and intellectual mastery of the mechanisms that regulate reality in its sensory manifestation have enabled the Western individual to modify many aspects of it to suit their own needs. Central among these is a well-ordered and fruitful coexistence with fellow human beings within a socially structured context oriented toward the achievement of shared existential benefits. The specificity of rational thought, as well as the key to its success, also lies in its ability to develop increasingly sophisticated models of functional correspondence between the heterogeneous multitude of phenomena that punctuate the life of the universe and the cognitive structures of the human mind.

Every aspect of reality thus becomes potentially explicable on the basis of the operational parameters of the intellect, which define an

interpretative key to which universal validity is attributed. The attitude of deep confidence in the epistemological relationship with the external world that is always open to the problematization and negotiation of new solutions is further strengthened by the affirmation of a close correspondence between knowledge and control.

In this view, even unknowability does not constitute an inviolable ontological status, but is rather conceived as a temporary condition related to the current inadequacy of human skills that it is hoped will be overcome in the more or less near future. Even unpredictable or uncontrollable events on the part of human beings come under the at least indirect domain of reason since it is able to identify and lucidly expound why they are beyond its control in the present moment. This means that it is capable of intuiting what pieces are still missing to solve a problem and thus, prospectively, of self-amendment by constructing new tools to overcome the obstacle.

The Western model of reason therefore contains a powerful generative impulse that makes it one of the main forces in determining the future arrangements of reality in its incessant becoming. This aspect relates easily to the emphasis that Hegel already placed on the markedly vitalistic nature of logic as an expressive and actualizing instrument of the creative potential of thought rather than as a merely formalistic syntax of the discursive process⁽¹⁾. In light of these considerations, it is evident that the notion of rationality has an intrinsic complexity and semantical polyvalence that do not allow it to be reduced to a single univocal attitude toward reality or the outcome of a linear evolutionary path.

On the contrary, Western media and public opinion often tend to develop a simplistic image of it by considering it an established fact and absolutizing its current formulation without taking into account the multiplicity of processes that have shaped it through the centuries. According to this irremediably partial perspective, the intense identity value of rationality is articulated in an exclusivist sense, becoming the distinguishing feature of the West in the confrontation, often marked by competitive accents, with other worldviews.

The cultural-historical investigation conducted in this book aims to demonstrate, on the contrary, how the creative interchange with varied

(1) G.W.F. HEGEL, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, Nürnberg, 1812-1816.

manifestations of otherness over time has played a determining role in shaping the inclusive and receptive versatility that characterizes the ideal form of Western thought. The latter is therefore not configured as a monolithic heritage resulting from a cohesive aggregation of already interrelated ethno-cultural identities in response to the looming threat of hostile diversity. On the contrary, it presents a distinctly composite nature created through an uninterrupted process of contaminations and dialectical interactions, often mediated in the past even through bloody armed clashes, which, however, have never prevented the creation of subterranean channels of communication between the parties. The unquestionable value of Western civilization is therefore also nourished by the influence exerted on its historical formation by ethno-cultural realities to which some politico-philosophical orientations of the contemporary world would like to see it ideologically opposed.

The premises for a potential conflict between the contemporary West and the rest of the world can indeed be identified in the radicality of its choice in favor of a markedly anthropocentric view of the world, which the other cultural identities appearing on the international stage find extremely difficult to accept since it stands in blatant contradiction to their cosmological conception. The latter, even in the variegated plurality of forms it takes depending on the specific context of reference, cannot actually disregard the idea that the fabric of reality springs from a dialectical relationship between the human being and a transcendent plane of existence to whose perception Western secular thought attributes an exclusively subjective value.

In this regard, it should be emphasized that the anthropocentrism of European origin does not concern the sphere of purpose, but rather that of meaning. In fact, science decisively denies that the universe exists for the sake of humankind, thereby positioning itself in contrast with Christian anthropocentrism, which presupposes a universe created according to a design at the center of which is the human being shaped in the image of God.

However, the explanations science provides regarding phenomenal reality are undeniably constructed on the basis of the cognitive mechanisms of the human mind. Human rational consciousness – namely the self-aware form of thought – therefore becomes the universal term

of reference on the basis of which the network of meanings underlying reality is structured. It is indeed worth noting that science itself declares that these meanings cannot aspire to absolute value, but are rather expressions of a relative and conventional truth. However, the scientific approach considers it legitimate to regard them as objective insofar as they are based on the shared cognitive tools that qualify human nature, and beyond which there is no alternative gnoseological perspective supported by concrete evidence. Only in very recent times do the astonishing advances in artificial intelligence seem to foreshadow the possibility that the exclusive dominance of the human point of view will be questioned, at least partially, in the not-too-distant future.

Nevertheless, it would still be a form of otherness derived from human consciousness of which even the most evolved manifestations of AI would represent an extension or enhancement. Thus, there would be no genuine ontological dualism comparable to that presupposed by the relationship of human beings with the transcendent dimension. The prolonged habit of the Western individual to perceive their own singularity in their relationship with the world is also coupled with a firm belief in the Enlightenment principle – now a cornerstone within international law – of the essential oneness and universality of human nature, regardless of cultural differences. The combination of these two factors has made the West inclined to believe that any form of otherness with which it comes into contact on the international stage must necessarily be reducible to its own patterns of thought insofar as they are rooted in the universally shared foundations of human nature.

Transforming the relationship with the transcendent into a subjective and nonessential variable of human existence, however, means crossing a boundary that other cultures of the world consider insurmountable. Indeed, this transgression produces an irreparable tear in the living texture of the universe and thus an unacceptable distortion of reality. The West is therefore urgently called upon to find new effective ways to enhance the specificity of its own identity-building journey in a world characterized by the striking multiplication and diversification of the interpretative paths of the human condition in its relation to reality.

This situation is most effectively exemplified by the image of the labyrinth evoked in the title of this book. In its semantic density,

reinforced by its mythological origin, it encompasses ancestral references to the concepts of challenge and survival, to the courage to question oneself in confrontation with the unknown by choosing one's own path of self-realization in the almost infinite multiplicity of potentially viable routes. The lucidity of such a choice also presupposes overcoming the understandable sense of bewilderment in the face of the plurality of available options and the variables at play, the final outcomes of which cannot be known with certainty. In such circumstances, the determination to act can only be found by looking deep within oneself to realize that the labyrinth is actually nothing more than an outward materialization of the inherently problematic, polyvalent, and polysemic character of human nature and its qualifying cognitive tool, namely reason. The labyrinth, however, is by definition also a place in which it is very easy to get lost and trapped. This second aspect is closely related to the representation that many people belonging to other cultures, especially in the East, develop of Western scholars or journalists by defining them as prisoners of their own minds.

The image of the labyrinth is in itself a very powerful incentive to the versatility of ingenuity, but an excessively self-referential use of reason can, according to the warning implicit in this way of perceiving Westerners, lead to enclosing oneself in one's own reassuring image of the world. This construct takes the form of an artificial dimension in which the mind of the subject arbitrarily establishes the boundaries between lawful and unlawful, truthful and false, as well as between imagination and reality. According to this representation, the presence of such invisible barriers prevents one from grasping the transcendent roots of the universe and thus the authentic essence of reality. Here, we are faced with a perspective according to which human thought does not fulfill its natural function by elevating the human being to a higher stage of consciousness, but instead coils around itself and loses itself in an endless and complacent investigation of its own mechanisms, instead of disclosing a deeper look at the surrounding world.

Most of the problems to which the Western individuals devote their attention are thus considered merely vain illusions created by an overactive and hypercritical mind. In order to feel satisfied, this type of mind actually needs to be continuously absorbed in the effort to untangle

intricate knots of meaning specifically generated through a self-reflexive process. These thus become cumbersome artificial superstructures of reality that obstruct the view of the truly fundamental issues of existence, which, within highly sacralized horizons, are all connected to the relationship with the transcendent. The cognitive hypertension of the Western mind, devoid of a higher purpose to which to aspire, inevitably produces an ethical impoverishment, exacerbated by its tendency to eschew the stillness of contemplation in which the deepest and most enlightening existential answers are contained.

The simple yet extraordinarily profound act of standing before the spectacle of the world, immersing oneself, for example, in the beauty of nature, constitutes a pillar of the quotidian experience of all the main interlocutors that the West faces. Indeed, it represents the most immediate gateway to a multidimensional understanding of existence, beginning with the expansion of sensory perception. Observing the world through a gaze charged with spiritual depth means allowing oneself to be amazed by the wonders of the universe, absorbing its energy by letting it penetrate deeply into the space of interiority, in which the recognition of being an integrated part of a living totality governed by a higher order matures. Such a discovery leads to the overcoming of the separation of subject and object that in the West, on the other hand, constitutes the prerequisite of knowledge itself.

Exactly to this sense of ecstatic wonder, which lies at the root of any spiritual experience, it would be appropriate to connect the appeal to the semantic sphere of enchantment in the field of religious studies. The interpretation of the disenchantment of the world as a process of demagification in authors such as Charles Taylor and Robert N. Bellah appears in my opinion to be reductive because it reflects the Eurocentric character of their view⁽²⁾. In fact, the equation linking magical practices and superstitious beliefs cannot be considered valid in all cultural contexts, but is mainly a feature of the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly in relation to the theme of idolatry. Certainly, any kind of religious sensibility firmly rejects familiarity with forces which it perceives as dark and evil, but this does not prevent mysticism from

(2) C. TAYLOR, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge MA, 2007; R.N. BELLAH, *Religion in Human Evolution. From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge MA, 2011.

also feeding on elements that a Western observer would call “magical”.

In Eastern cultures, and more generally in those endowed with an animistic substratum, magic is nothing more than the ability on the part of certain chosen individuals, specifically trained through initiatory paths, to channel through themselves the generative and transformative power that pervades the universe. It is thus in no way at odds with the exercise of human intellectual faculties in constructing an image of the world, but it represents the extension of their range of action on the cosmic plane. The subject thus connects directly with the higher forces that shape reality by at least partially directing their flow from within. Moreover, in their interventions, the shaman or “magician” uses, through a sophisticated symbolic interface, the same genetic code – although mystically rather than materialistically based as that employed by science – following which the universe is produced and transformed, with or without the guidance of a divine entity.

The partly innate and partly acquired affinity that the chosen subject has with the creative language of the universe shields them from the risk of causing irreparable distortions in the texture of the cosmos or of disturbing perceived higher entities. Moreover, the effectiveness of such practices does not need, from the perspective of local people, to be supported by any tangible evidence, which contemporary Western critical consciousness considers instead a prerequisite for validating the existence of a phenomenon.

However, the fact that those who live constantly immersed in this mystical-magical atmosphere do not feel the need to provide a plausible demonstration of it should not be considered an indicator of a superficial or naive attitude. In the Western collective imagination, the “magic” presented in the multiple strands of fantasy novels, and more recently in fantasy movies, is configured as an arcane force primarily capable of altering the physical properties of material objects; the practices we are discussing, however, are something totally different. Indeed, their purpose is not to act directly on the physical world but to improve the efficiency and quality of the relationship between the human subject and the surrounding universe. Any references to the transformation of matter must therefore be interpreted as a metaphorical-allegorical reflection of an inner mutation.

The demonstration of the efficacy of the aforementioned practices cannot therefore be grasped in external reality, but is implicitly contained in the lived experience of those involved in them. For those individuals, however, their beneficial influences are self-evident, and the only way for an outside observer to obtain proof of them would be to experience them firsthand. In the light of these considerations, one can better understand the perplexity manifested by many traditional cultures toward the mechanisms of European thought to which they attribute the tendency to exclude from the horizon of the possible that which does not meet their own unilaterally established parameters of plausibility.

According to such a view, Western individuals are unable to nourish their consciousness with the answers that emerge from the continual deepening of the meaning of the relationship between their own being and the order of the universe in which they find themselves harmoniously embedded. Instead, they prefer to venture into an endless series of self-generated questions, the exhausting multiplicity of which is fueled by an obsessive reliance on the exercise of doubt. This is widely regarded as the foundation of critical thinking at the heart of European civilization, but – outside of that cultural sphere – insidious dangers are associated with it because of the disruptive power it holds in relation to the cosmic oneness of being. The exponential multiplication of the pathways explorable by human thought that doubt necessarily produces is certainly visualized very effectively by the endless bifurcations of the labyrinth. However, in the conceptualizations of the latter developed by non-European cultures, its most disturbing aspects tend to become predominant. They materialize primarily in the risk of remaining trapped in a dead end leading to the demise of one's soul.

Through this lens, the mental labyrinth is even more insidious than the material one because it is constructed by the very mind of the subject who feels illusorily comfortable in it and thus remains unaware that they have strayed from the truth. Therefore, it falls to the West to prove the groundlessness of these concerns of its interlocutors by demonstrating its ability to identify and confidently walk the path toward the realization of its own identity model, in harmony with the varied plurality of different cultural contexts surrounding it. The fundamental first

step in this regard is the ability to rediscover and enhance the composite character of the experiences that have shaped its historical becoming and its collective rational soul.

This seeming oxymoron, which in itself harks back to the ancient philosophical tradition – particularly that rooted in Greek thought – immediately reveals that the primacy of reason could never have established itself without an intense and fruitful centuries-old interchange with the spiritual dimension of existence. This should not be understood here only in the more specific sense related to religious experience, but extends to the valuable intangible implications of human creativity in its relationship with the emotional sphere and artistic expressiveness. An urgent need thus arises to deconstruct an extremely reductive stereotype that the West has largely contributed to creating about itself. Specifically, it is necessary to overcome the dangerous idea that the essence of Western civilization can be entirely condensed into a univocal vision of reality – one rooted in materialistic determinism, regarded as an indispensable premise for scientific and technological development.

Of course, the contemporary intellectual debate presents a wide range of far more complex positions, but it is nonetheless configured as an elitist phenomenon, whose protagonists (academics, journalists, analysts, etc.) confront each other on a common ground shaped by Western-style university education. By contrast, most of the difficulties in intercultural communication arise from below, from the daily interaction between ethno-cultural groups that do not base their reflections on the refined theoretical analyses of the intellectual world, but rather on self-constructed images formed from evidence perceived through daily contact with diversity.

Within this framework, the contents of high-profile academic studies – as well as the reference to the thought of distinguished protagonists of the modern history of Western philosophy – can certainly offer valuable insights, but must be adapted to the concrete situational dynamics of multicultural experience. Indeed, they presuppose more or less consciously an anthropocentric view of reality based on the central role of the typically Western critical subjectivity, to which they remain implicitly linked even when they venture into the exploration of sensibilities characteristic of different ethno-geographical areas.

In investigating such realities, in fact, European and U.S. authors usually show strong familiarity with socio-anthropological and historicist approaches, but demonstrate little affinity for a perspective based on all-inclusive cosmological models that center on the relationship with the transcendent, conceived as an entity autonomous from human beings. Since, however, this is precisely the prevailing view of the universe outside the Western world and its extensions in international academic circles, such difficulties risk representing a deadlock in the dialogue between the secular West and non-European religions. Indeed, any attempt to shift the axis of debate toward a negotiation between human beings that focuses on existential customs and signification of reality, while eluding the direct involvement of the transcendent, is doomed to failure in the long run.

Its effectiveness is, at best, limited to specific circumstances of contingent opportunity on the political-economic and diplomatic level of interstate relations or on the social level of the peaceful coexistence of different communities in the same territory. However, such a success cannot be considered a lasting one as it is not solidly rooted in the consciousness of the parties but is based on reasons of convenience. This model of conciliation is therefore too superficial to effectively prevent the outbreak of conflicts as a consequence of incidents or misunderstandings that can greatly disturb the deeper and more authentic layers of religious sensibility. Here, then, a problem emerges, the existence of which is particularly difficult for Western mindset to recognize and engage with. Indeed, the secular thought of European origin tends to considerate interreligious dialogue from a juridical-contractualist standpoint, often underestimating the intensity of the emotional involvement that can arise from a relationship with the transcendent experienced in a totalizing way.

Conversely, the choice of the countries inspired by the European philosophical tradition in favor of the absolute primacy of reason appears to be resolute and essentially irreversible. This implies that a genuine harmonization between these two visions proves difficult to achieve by remaining anchored in the immediacy of the present, in which the West usually concentrates all its vital energies while impatiently rushing into the future⁽³⁾.

(3) Extremely interesting in this regard appear Hartmut Rosa's remarks on the concept of acceleration in the contemporary age. See H. ROSA, *Alienation and Acceleration: Toward a*

The only way out of this impasse seems to lie in rediscovering, from a new multicultural perspective, the historical depth of an identity that the West tends to regard as an inherent trait of its original essence, rather than as the result of a gradual attainment. The labyrinth that the rational consciousness forged by European civilization must traverse in order to find its harmonious placement in contemporary global world⁽⁴⁾ does therefore not simply constitute the allegorical materialization of a spatial complexity – both geographical and mental – but rather build upon it an equally intricate temporal dimension.

Actually, delving into its meanderings also means probing the historical becoming in search of the constituent elements of a sophisticated balance between human intellect and transcendence that have been covered and encapsulated by the more recent layers of the identity sedimentation process. Such aspects, normally regarded as the legacy of a now concluded and outdated evolutionary phase of Western civilization, can instead find a renewed vital impetus and unexpected opportunities for creative reworking within the framework of intercultural dialogue.

Indeed, they can significantly contribute to the construction of a more reassuring image of the West in the eyes of its interlocutors. It would thus present itself in a substantially renewed guise. Its rational consciousness would in fact appear not as prejudicially skeptical toward transcendence, but as willing to dialectically bring into play the certainties acquired through its own path in the history of humanity, while offering a valid and original contribution also on the ground of spiritual research. In fact, the latter still represents one of the most effective forms of expression of the human being's unquenchable desire to follow the incessant call of the unknown, discovering along the way increasingly refined levels of self-consciousness and awareness of the world around them.

Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality, Aarhus, 2010; H. ROSA, *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*, New York, 2013.

(4) The term is used here in the generic meaning it takes on in the common perception of the citizens of Western countries, regardless of the numerous theses developed within the academic field in favor of or against the validity of this concept. Indeed, an in-depth analysis of them is beyond the specific scope of this study.

CHAPTER I

ECHOES OF TRANSCENDENCE IN THE WESTERN RATIONALITY IN QUEST OF A LOST LEGACY

One of the most delicate and challenging aspects with which the Western sensibility is inevitably called upon to deal as it enters the contemporary international stage is the rich plurality of visions of reality represented on it. They have now reached a level of self-awareness and actualizing potential that puts them in a position to decisively influence the order and balance of the world. Therefore, it seems completely unrealistic to think that such visions can all be traced back to a single macro-model of collective existence marked by the fundamental principles of modernity shaped according to the Western perspective.

The element that perhaps more than any other prevents this homogenization, making it inevitable that human beings learn to live harmoniously with diversity, is the non-equivalence of the cosmological models to which the various cultures of the planet refer. Among the many differences, all of great complexity, there is one that establishes the singularity of the West compared to its interlocutors. It consists in the progressive fading of familiarity with the perception of a universe pervaded by forces that elude immediate human comprehension and transcend the material and objective dimension of reality.

It is precisely the increasingly frequent contact with varied forms of cultural otherness, however, that seems to have aroused, even in the West, a renewed attention to the sphere of spirituality, including its institutionalized manifestations, namely historical religions. In fact, this

area of human experience has long been considered a marginal and almost anachronistic factor compared to other areas crucial to the development of humanity, such as technology and social sciences. Indeed, a large part of the Western public opinion still tends to regard research concerning religion and spirituality as the complacency of an elitist taste for erudition pursued for its own sake, not unfrequently associated, in the collective imagination, with clerical circles.

The alleged intellectualistic abstractness of such investigations that are supposedly devoid of any significant impact on real life is readily contradicted by current events. In fact, they demonstrate the existence of an inseparable link between the spiritual experience of each ethno-cultural community and the development of a specific ethical sensibility that decisively influences its behavior on the social and political level. This impact is naturally more evident in non-Western cultures, which generally still retain a markedly sacralized view of reality. It is, however, also discernible, at least indirectly, in the secular West to the extent that many of the legal formulations that characterize the domain of law find their ideal roots in Christian thought.

The growing relevance that religious studies are assuming in contemporary society is thus linked to the numerous anthropological and cultural mechanisms – as well as to the extraordinary creative and propulsive energies – which the religious phenomenon is capable of activating in the process of identity definition of the human communities that compose the mosaic of contemporary global world. Undoubtedly, the concept of “religion” is highly polysemic and therefore eludes any attempt at unambiguous definition.

Nonetheless, the concrete form in which it has manifested in human history is essentially that of an interpretative and expressive code through which each ethno-cultural community transposes the perception of its relationship with the transcendent into its own individual and collective experience. We are faced here with another term to be used with extreme caution in light of the varied plurality of meanings it can assume depending on the cultural context of reference. In its most neutral and strictly etymological meaning, it denotes that which lies beyond the material dimension of everyday life and which, in order to be