



Lesson 14:

Rationalism and Pragmatism/Experientialism

Now we look at a few more “isms” that have had profound impact on how our culture thinks and on Christianity itself. Before we begin, let me remind you of a couple of truths from God’s Word:

Isaiah 55:8-9

8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.

Jeremiah 9:23-24

23 Thus says the Lord, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?

Rationalism

Rationalism is a very old idea, being found in Plato, philosophers of the Middle Ages, and in the Age of Enlightenment. We’ll briefly examine the Enlightenment because it still has an immense influence on Western thinking.

The Age of Enlightenment

The Enlightenment extended from the mid 1600’s to the late 1700’s. It was a time during which leading writers and scientists in Europe and America foresaw a new age enlightened by reason, science, and respect for humanity. It was a time of new discoveries in science, exploration of the world, and great leaps forward in technology.

Leading figures of the Enlightenment: *René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke*

Of the basic assumptions and beliefs common to philosophers and intellectuals of this period, perhaps the most important was an abiding faith in the power of _____. If humanity could unlock the laws of the universe, God’s own laws, why could it not also discover the laws underlying all of nature and society? People came to assume that through a prudent use of _____, an unending _____ would be possible—progress in knowledge, in technical achievement, and even in moral values.

Rationalism Defined

Rationalism was a key component of Enlightenment thinking. It stresses the ability of the human mind to _____ things. *Rationalists hold that whatever is knowable by the human mind is true.* The human mind has an innate ability to understand things. Reasonable thought and logic become the tests of truth. Whatever is logically inescapable is necessarily

true. If something is unreasonable, it must not be true. So the emphasis in rationalism is the _____, _____, and human _____.

Contributions of Rationalism

Without logic and reason, there is no way to make meaningful statements, no way to distinguish right from wrong. Also, rationalism's emphasis on the _____ of reality is good. The universe is not just an illusion. Man's mind has the capacity to know and experience reality.

Weaknesses of Rationalism

1. The rational may not be _____. That is, something may make sense without being true. For example, scientists continually change their explanations for various phenomena. Arguments often seem rational until they are proven to be _____. Logic does not lead necessarily to reality. If one starts with wrong assumptions, he will inevitably come to wrong conclusions, even if he proceeds rationally.
2. Rationalists tend to arrive at their basic presuppositions without the use of _____. Their presuppositions are not subject to tests of logic. Rationalists think they are being rational because they are rational. It's impossible to provide a starting point for rationalism without presupposing the truth of rationalism. Rationalism is just as circular in its reasoning as any other system.
3. Logic is best used as a _____ test for truth. It can rule out what is illogical and unreasonable, but it has a hard time proving what is true. It can eliminate the false but it cannot (by itself) establish what must be true. Logic can demonstrate what may be real but not what is actually real. Again, something may seem logical and yet be untrue or unreal.
4. While some rationalists have proposed _____ arguments for proving the existence of God, such arguments are quite weak and unconvincing to most unbelievers. Further, we know that unbelievers do not ultimately come to Christ because of weighty logical arguments, but because of God's work within their lives.
5. For most modern rationalists, the Bible is a mythical storybook that has little or no value. Rationalism rejects Christianity as _____.

A Biblical Response to Rationalism

1. Logic and reasonable thought are basic aspects of _____. Christianity is a reasonable faith and benefits from the application of the laws of logic.
2. The ways of God do not need to _____ to man's sense of reason. God's ways are unsearchable and past finding out (Romans 11:34)¹, and God's thoughts are higher than the heavens (Isaiah 55:8-9)². We should not be surprised if God's ways exceed the human intellect's ability to understand them.
3. If God exists, it is reasonable for Him to interrupt the natural order of things if He so desires. _____ are not irrational.

¹ Romans 11:34 - For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR?

² Isaiah 55:8-9 - 8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts."

4. There is no _____ of truth, logic or reality higher than, or independent of, God, to which He must conform. God sets such standards. While God is logical, He need not conform to human ideas of reason. God and His ways are not irrational or illogical, although they may be beyond man's ability to grasp them.
5. God is _____. We can know God, and what we know about Him is true, but our knowledge of God is not complete.

Although some rationalists argue on behalf of Christianity, most modern rationalists deny God and the Bible. Rationalism, as a philosophy of life, because it depends so much on human the intellect, does not conform well to Christianity. God is under no obligation to explain His ways to man. Rationality, on the other hand, is the handmaid of good theology. All believers should strive to be rational and logical.

Pragmatism/Experientialism

“_____” is the mantra of pragmatism. To be pragmatic is to be _____, to insist on using whatever methods or tools that work best. A pragmatist is one who focuses on getting the job done in the most successful and simple way. He is not concerned about theories or hypothetical solutions. He doesn't have time for the mysteries of philosophy or religion. He is a practical man, a realist, not a dreamer. He wants useful results as soon as possible. If the results are acceptable, the method that achieved them is acceptable. Whatever works best *is* best. The ends (i.e., the results) justify the means (i.e., the methods).

Pragmatism is the dominant attitude shaping American life. Americans want results. They want to do things better, faster, cheaper, cleaner, and easier. Pragmatism is the spirit of problem solving. Science and technology can provide rubber-meets-the-road solutions to virtually all of man's problems.

Pragmatism may sound pretty harmless, but there are several dangerous implications associated with it.

1. Pragmatism tends to be basically _____ or _____. It is highly skeptical of any theological or metaphysical claims. Metaphysics and theology deal with ultimate questions. Is there a God? What is he like? What is the nature of reality? Who am I? Why am I here? The pragmatist cares little about such issues. He's too busy putting food on the table or money in the bank. He would say that searching for the answer to such questions is a foolish waste of time.
2. Pragmatism is focused on the here-and-now, the _____ rather than the _____. According to the pragmatist, whatever works best *now* is best. But Christianity asserts that there is a higher standard to consider: the judgment of God. In God's judgment, whatever will bring the most glory to Himself is best, whether it seems to work here on earth or not. Pragmatism rejects any kind of eternal analysis.
3. “What works” and “_____” are not necessarily synonymous. The fact that something seems to work does not guarantee that it is true or good. For example, the pragmatist would say that if belief in God helps someone cope with life, then let people believe in God. If it doesn't help, then don't believe in God. Pragmatism can't say if there is a God or not.

4. Pragmatism is another form of _____. If truth is determined by what works for the individual, then the test for truth ultimately becomes the individual himself. "Works for me" is the pragmatist's slogan. Thus the _____ becomes the highest value.
5. Pragmatism's _____ tends to be savage and inhumane. What works often causes great pain and suffering for masses of people. It "worked" for the Nazis to exterminate millions of Jews during WWII. It "worked" for Stalin and Mao Tse Tung to kill millions of their own countrymen to achieve their communist goals. Pragmatism has no basis for basic human rights, kindness or compassion.

Unfortunately, a spirit of pragmatism has crept into Christianity. This attitude suggests that any method that succeeds in spreading the gospel and/or making converts is acceptable. However, in Christian ministry, we know that the _____ do not necessarily justify the _____. That is, the goal of spreading the gospel does not validate all means of doing so. Certain methods are simply inappropriate for use within Christianity because they violate the character of God. For example, transforming the worship service into an entertaining variety show may increase attendance, but it does not glorify God. Christians must do God's work in God's way, even if it doesn't seem to work that way.

Conclusion: Both rationalism and pragmatism are _____ to Christianity. Because rationalism subjects all truth to human _____, it has no room for an omnipotent God. What is rational is not necessarily real. God's ways go beyond man's ability to find them out. Because pragmatism tests all things by "what works," it has no place for _____ or _____. Pragmatism can tell you what works now, but not whether your work has _____ value.

Discussion:

1. Define rationalism.
2. Why is rationalism ultimately circular in its reasoning?
3. Define God's incomprehensibility.
4. What is pragmatism?
5. Why can't pragmatism distinguish good from evil?
6. How has pragmatism affected Christianity?