

## Chapter 2

# Is a Rational Politics a Real Possibility?

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**Abstract** It is important to question the assumption, practically universal in works on political theory, that both political theory and politics are rational. In various articles Hwa Yol and Petee Jung have insisted on a broad conception of political rationality, influenced by both Eastern and Western traditions—that of phenomenology being especially prominent. In an article about voluntary association that Hwa Yol Jung reprinted in an anthology that he edited, I attacked oversimplified views of rationality, notably the equation of the latter with what voluntary agents with adequate knowledge would ideally agree upon. It is evident that the meaning of “rationality” varies greatly among individuals, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that, by almost any measure of rationality, the human race as a collective has repeatedly acted irrationally on a grand scale over its comparatively brief history. Some examples of this are offered, concluding with the civil wars and NATO intervention in former Yugoslavia and the long-standing United States atomic policy of “Mutually Assured Destruction.” But perhaps the most threatening of all human irrationality, for the long run, is the destruction of our ecosystem, in opposition to which Hwa Yol and Petee Jung have proposed an attitude of “ecopiety.” While pessimism about the future of the human race seems strongly justified, the very pervasiveness of irrationality in politics suggests that *anything* is possible—even, perhaps, the ultimate triumph of ecopiety.

In little, if any, of the writing about politics of which I am aware, Western or Eastern, ancient or contemporary, does one find any questioning, any bracketing if you will, of the assumption that politics, together with any theory *about* politics, must be rational. A case might be made, I suppose, for some essays within the Fascist orbit—for example, some aspects of Carl Schmitt’s decisionism, or some essays by Panunzio or speeches by Mussolini—as counter-examples. Perhaps one might even try to see some critiques of the politics of Enlightenment rationalism by contemporaries or near-contemporaries such as Burke or De Maistre, for example, in this light. However, even such putative counter-examples are on the whole undergirded

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by the assumption that it is the *critic* of what had until then been considered mainstream or conventional rationality who is in fact reasonable and rational, whereas it is the so-called rationality of his opponents that is actually irrational or crazy; this is the dominant tone of *Mein Kampf*, for instance. After all, if one is going to go to the trouble of arguing for a position, does not this very action presuppose that the position is rationally defensible?

Most or all of the dispute concerning rationality, then, has turned on the question, as part of the title of one of Alasdair MacIntyre's books puts it, "Which Rationality?" It is in this area that the contribution of Hwa Yol Jung, together with Petee Jung in the cases of several articles that they co-authored, has been especially valuable. For he has consistently, over the years, demonstrated the glaring inadequacies of certain narrow forms of thinking that go by such names as behaviorism or technological rationality. He has done so in always lucid, calm prose, bringing to bear his vast learning and insights from both the Confucian and Taoist and the phenomenological traditions (as well as many other perspectives, of course), and arguing, beginning long before John Rawls decided that there was a distinction to be made between "rationality" and "reasonableness" and continuing over the years since Rawls' death, that a broad understanding of political rationality was possible by means of a broad conception of rationality in political theory. In the concluding paragraph of his essay, "The Political Relevance of Existential Phenomenology," which is the introductory piece of his anthology *Existential Phenomenology and Political Theory: A Reader*, he wrote the following:

In conclusion, it must be stressed that politics and philosophy are intertwined. The underlying basis of political philosophy is the idea that philosophy cannot exclude politics from the legitimate domain of human rationality and thus from its inquiry.... Although political existence is by no means the whole of human reality, philosophy that abandons politics is unquestionably less than reasonable and complete, for the rationality of politics sustains in part the rationality of philosophy. For this reason existential phenomenology, like every great philosophy, endeavors to understand political rationality in order to understand its own rationality in fullness.<sup>1</sup>

In this same book, Hwa Yol Jung was kind enough to include, as the final chapter, an essay of mine entitled "Voluntary Association: The Basis of an Ideal Model, and the 'Democratic' Failure." This article had originally been published in 1969 and was inspired in large measure by a combination of (1) a decision by members of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy to devote one of their annual meetings and the proceedings resulting therefrom to the topic of "voluntary associations," and (2) my own feeling that, while the ideal or principle of voluntary association is fundamentally positive and valuable and is fundamentally linked with whatever is worthwhile about democracy, the disastrous American war against Vietnam was proof that democracy in practice had failed. Without attempting to summarize all the points that I made in this relatively long piece, I would like to cite a few sentences from a small section of it in which I considered "rationality" as one plausible but ultimately inadequate candidate (along with "unanimity" or "consensus")

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<sup>1</sup> Hwa Yol Jung, "The Political Relevance of Existential Phenomenology," in Jung, ed., *Existential Phenomenology and Political Theory* (Chicago: Regnery, 1972), xlix.

and “wish-fulfillment”) as the underlying value that most clearly justifies the principle of voluntary association in politics:

Have not nations and private associations, great and small, often shown remarkable if temporary unanimity in rejecting all courses of action that later chroniclers have come to regard as the most rational options available to them at the time, in order to embark on their own versions of the Athenian expedition to Syracuse? “Desire” and “reason,” as Plato well saw, do not necessarily fix upon the same goals.

Moreover, the difficulty in determining just what constitutes the ideal of “rationality” is well known...The ideally “rational” society lends itself to very widely divergent interpretations. There is, for example, the familiar question whether the more rational society is the highly institutionalized one whose members meticulously follow a highly detailed and coherent set of rules or the one whose members continually place all rules in question; is the criterion of rationality to be strictness of organization or scope of allowable possibilities? The history of thought is replete with examples of acquiescence in the temptation to equate what is rational with what would ideally be agreed upon by truly voluntary agents with adequate knowledge, but surely it should by now be realized that such an equation, at least in the domain of action (as opposed to “pure theory”), is hopelessly oversimplified.<sup>2</sup>

In re-reading the final sentence just cited, I could not help but think of the subsequent popularity of the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, which was at that time just beginning its meteoric rise, a philosophy at the core of which that very same “hopeless oversimplification,” if my characterization is correct, is to be found. At any rate, this text demonstrates that my concern over the nature of rationality, and especially of sociopolitical rationality, is, like Professor Jung’s, a longstanding one. Nowadays, however, while I continue to endorse and to believe in the possibility of comprehending, understanding, phenomenologically, the intentionalities underlying any and all political action, I am more skeptical than ever before as to whether the expression “sociopolitical rationality” means anything but an illusion in the real world.

My reference to this text of mine and to the volume in which Professor Jung included it also demonstrates the length of the time-period over which he and I have been associated—have had a “voluntary association,” as it were—and leads me to adduce several other facts surrounding this 1971 volume which I hope eventually to show are more interrelated than may at first appear. When I express my gratitude at his kindness in including my essay in his volume, it is important to mention the names of the other authors he selected, all of which appear on the cover along with mine: Natanson, Schrader, Marcel, Husserl, Sartre, Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty, Schutz, Wild, and Dufrenne—distinguished company indeed! And it is important also to note Professor Jung’s reference, in his Preface, to the academic year 1970–1971, a year he spent on sabbatical leave from his own college, when, although I had met him even earlier at SPEP (Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy) conferences, he and I and Petee and my wife became much better acquainted. During that spring of 1971, I had the opportunity to teach a joint graduate course in philosophy and law that I devoted to the topic, “Natural Law.” It is the only time I have ever taught an entire course on this topic, and my decision to make it my focus

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<sup>2</sup>William McBride, “Voluntary Association: The Basis of an Ideal Model, and the ‘Democratic’ Failure,” in *ibid.*, 398–99.

that semester was in large part motivated by the fact that Professor Jung had indicated an interest in sitting in on it, and I had therefore thought, as in fact turned out to have been the case, that I would be able to draw on his background as a former student of Leo Strauss. Among those registered in my course from both departments were some philosophy students who have since made names for themselves in the field of social and political philosophy and also some law students who later became well known beyond the Yale campus, notably one from Arkansas named Clinton. Years later, he was to mention me by full name and this course, though by the incorrect title of “National Law and Philosophy,”<sup>3</sup> as part of the highly comprehensive account of his activities that is to be found in his autobiography. Thus, like practically everyone else, I have something in common with Andy Warhol.

What has all of this to do with the possibility or impossibility of a rational politics? We shall see, or at least I hope so; my mention of Bill Clinton may have provided some clue. What has already been established, or rather re-established, at the least, is the unlikelihood of reaching full agreement on a precise meaning of the term, together with the importance, as stressed throughout Professor Jung’s writings, of always endeavoring to pursue a rational comprehension or understanding, *whatever* that may mean, of the political. (I should mention, in passing, that I take this also to be the single most salient objective of a major, and still insufficiently well-known, work to which I have devoted considerable attention, Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. In it, Sartre, like Professor Jung but more hesitantly than the latter, puts into question the Hegelian notion of an unswerving progression of history towards a certain inevitable goal.) In the spirit of this commitment to intelligibility, for example, we should be able to reconstruct, as Thucydides himself attempted to do in the first case, the series of projects, individual and collective, successful, half successful, and failed, that led the Athenians to their Waterloo at Syracuse, Napoleon to his Waterloo at Waterloo, or Lyndon Johnson to his Waterloo in Vietnam.

*But*—and here I end what has essentially been prolegomenon and come to my main point—the term “rationality” always comes to us complete with a certain halo—even, I would argue, when it is being deployed in a dismissive way, as in the expression “mere technological rationality.” The rational, that is, is always thought to be what is somehow fulfilling our potential as human beings, *even* when one is referring to massive violence, cruelty, and brutality, as in the case of Sartre’s account of the events surrounding the taking of the Bastille, or Machiavelli’s explanation of why new leaders sometimes need to carry out exemplary murders, or the hundreds of thousands of accounts, from Homer onward in the West and perhaps even earlier in the East, of glorious victories over evil enemies in war. These are commonplaces of everyone’s education, everyone’s experience: on the one hand, rationality means a fulfillment of human potential, not just one’s own individual potential, but the potential of humanity as a whole; on the other hand, the idea of rationality also includes at times the actual cutting off of other human beings’ future potentials by killing or incapacitating them, and much more frequently the implicit *threat* to cut

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 180.

them off if they cross lines that we, whoever “we” may be in a given case, are prepared to lay down. (Consider the United States government policy on pre-emptive attacks—permissible against any country at any time whenever deemed advisable—as a model of this.) But, to say both these things at once seems clearly to be engaging in blatant contradiction—contradiction, the ultimate verbal irrationality. To put it as bluntly as I can, even more bluntly than my chosen title does, it would seem that the human race is condemned as a collective, despite all the posturing and pretensions and best efforts of philosophers over the centuries, to acting irrationally on a grand, historic scale. While the evidence in favor of this claim may not be absolutely conclusive, I find it to be nearly so, and so I shall argue in the remainder of this paper, drawing some support from the writings of Professor Jung himself.

First, let me mention some quibbles and qualifications with respect to my formulation of the issue. When I speak of “acting irrationally,” of course, all the questions about the *meaning* of “rational” and “irrational” arise anew. It is true that, if you decree that language means whatever you choose it to mean, as the Bush Administration so often tended to do when referring to “torture,” “enemy combatants,” the “war zone” in the “war on terror”—essentially, everywhere on earth—and so on, then it is impossible to make headway in proving my case. For then the most insane political action imaginable can be redefined as “rational” by *fiat*. But when I claim that the human race is, or at least may well be, condemned to acting irrationally on a grand, historic scale, I mean that it may be condemned to incessant, repeated actions in violation of its own potential—actions in flagrant opposition to the always-assumed positive valence of the idea of rationality—that will continue indefinitely until it finally succeeds in annihilating itself. Another quibble has to do with my expression “grand, historic scale,” which I used to think meant a lot but now fully understand to mean, from a broader perspective, not much. The lifespan of the human race itself, as we know, has been comparatively short by comparison with the period of time during which the planet Earth has existed, and the latter, in turn, is a comparative newcomer in the universe. As for the time over which something like what we call “civilization” has “flourished”—please be sure to put both the noun and the verb in scare quotes—here and there on earth, this fairly unsuccessful experiment has lasted a very short time indeed. If, for example, we arbitrarily set it at 5000 years up to the present, the time of my acquaintance and interaction with Professor Jung constitutes nearly 1 % of that span; and one part in 100 is a quite considerable quantity in a society that tends to think in terms of millions, billions, and trillions. So the “grand scale of history,” so called, is not really so grand after all.

But what a ride it has been, that history, however brief its span! Times of Mongol conquests, of Barbarian invasions, of Crusades leading to slaughters so impressive that the blood of Jewish and Moslem victims was said to come up to the ankles of the victorious Crusaders in Jerusalem, of the discovery of a whole New World in which to practice genocide with impunity, and on and on. When something beautiful or grandiose or both has been constructed, it has always been fair game for destruction: Alexander, Aristotle’s erstwhile pupil, burned Persepolis to the ground, the library in the city he founded in Egypt eventually met the same fate, and in that same

country the Pyramids, erected by the Pharaohs with a view to assuring their souls' sustenance in the afterlife, were systematically looted, leaving nothing but the structures themselves and occasionally the mummies. Fast-forwarding from earlier times to the recent past, we should note that the rate of violent civilian deaths caused by wars and genocides experienced a huge upsurge from the eighteenth and nineteenth to the twentieth centuries—the Holocaust being just one especially horrifying portion, but far from a majority portion, of the total. As Aristotle, ever the master of understatement, put it so well, “Man is not the best thing in the universe.”

In recalling what is of course well known to everyone in a general way and exploring its meaning in terms of ultimate human irrationality, I would like to make special mention of a case with which Professor Jung and I have some personal familiarity, that of the wars and massacres in former Yugoslavia. Near the beginning of his book, *The Crisis of Political Understanding*, he cites, in passing, the Serbian philosopher, Mihailo Marković, on the notion of the unity of theory and practice in Marxist thought and on the importance of a philosopher's *living* his or her philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Professor Marković used to write very convincingly about these matters—in many ways, he certainly convinced *me*—and yet as civil war loomed he became an increasingly strong advocate of Serbian supremacy and later adopted what can only be characterized as a cavalier attitude toward the deaths and upheavals brought about by that war. I witnessed firsthand this amazing transformation, as I and many others who knew the man saw it, but as he saw it, it was a principled continuity of thinking in response to changing historical circumstances. Perhaps, if we as a race are truly condemned to irrationality in the long run, his perspective on himself was the truer one.

Mention of former Yugoslavia brings to mind a slightly more recent series of episodes, one in which my erstwhile student, Clinton, was centrally implicated: the NATO bombing campaign. I have written at some length about my perceptions of the implications of this, perceptions which themselves depend in part on details that have mostly been forgotten, it is safe to say, by most people in the world: the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the bombing of the television station because its personnel were charged with broadcasting propaganda, the destruction of the bridge at Novi Sad that for some years put an end to what had previously been heavy cargo traffic along the length of the Danube River, the repeated bombing of the passenger train near Niš that was bound for Greece, and on and on. Let me simply say here, without attempting any additional explanation, that I consider these military actions carried out by the Clinton administration as themselves further instances of the pervasive web of irrationality to which I have been calling attention. Jürgen Habermas defended the bombings at the time but has since, to his credit, expressed doubts; among others, Virginia Held, an eminent political philosopher who was a vehement critic of the attack on Iraq by the Bush administration in 2003, has for some reason continued (at least as of the time of my most recent encounter with her, probably about a year later) to defend the earlier actions of the Clintonians.

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<sup>4</sup>Hwa Yol Jung, *The Crisis of Political Understanding: A Phenomenological Perspective in the Conduct of Political Inquiry* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979), 12.

But let us leave former Yugoslavia behind and turn to a more recent time, the time of Shrub. It brings only a little comfort to be reassured that most people even in the United States now regard his attack on Iraq as having been a mistake—although probably most would not go so far as to call it “irrational.” There is a multiplicity of ironies involved in the fact that some of the strongest proponents of this mad attack, beginning with Paul Wolfowitz, were themselves former students of Leo Strauss, whose heir, Alan Bloom, is depicted in Saul Bellow’s *roman à clef* about his last days, *Ravelstein*, as having high-up friends in the White House. The road from the rigid objectivism (or, as Hwa Yol Jung has called it, “ontological determinism”) of Strauss, rooted in Classical philosophy, to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 is by no means simple to comprehend, but perhaps an initial clue is Strauss’s proud insistence, early in one of his best-known essay collections (*What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*) on the deep truth of the dictum, which he says “everyone knows,” that “the aim of war is victory.”<sup>5</sup> But such ironies are diverting without being consoling. For Iraq is but the tip of the global iceberg that antedates both Bush dynasties and is spread across the whole world. Take the single most obvious linguistic illustration, at least in the past half century, of my thesis of ultimate irrationality: the official United States policy, now generally thought of as obsolete, known by the acronym “MAD,” to wit, Mutual Assured Destruction through nuclear weapons. But the logic/illogic of MAD is in fact not dead: for one thing, it is still very operative in the policy planning of the northern half of Hwa Yol Jung’s native country, Korea, as well as apparently, despite a thick veil of secrecy, in the planning of the State of Israel. I have on several occasions warned, in print, that the possibility of an eventual widespread nuclear exchange, involving the United States and Russia or possibly China and/or other countries in possession of such weapons, is still on the table and should not be discounted—although I should add that, if my tentative prophecy should prove accurate, I would almost certainly not be in a position to express a triumphant “I told you so.”

On the other hand, although no expert in these matters, I am *reasonably* certain, so to speak, that the envisaged global nuclear exchange would not entirely extinguish all human life, much less all life on the planet Earth: at the very least, I would expect there to be pockets of humanity still existing in parts of the Southern Hemisphere. No, the honor of threatening to effect the total extinction of life lies with another monumental irrationality, one on which Hwa Yol and Petee Jung have focused in a number of articles, namely, the degradation of the ecosystem. (When I wrote that the disaster in Iraq was only the tip of the global iceberg of irrationality, I was thinking of the future likelihood that icebergs themselves will vanish, so that the meaning of the metaphor itself will eventually be lost.) In an article published some 30-odd years ago in *Environmental Ethics*, entitled “The Orphic Voice and Ecology,” Hwa Yol Jung was already warning, using Heideggerian language, of the utter thoughtlessness of our time.<sup>6</sup> But the starkest of all the formulations of his that I have found on the subject occurs on the opening page of his 1989 essay in *Research*

<sup>5</sup>Leo Strauss, *‘What Is Political Philosophy?’ and Other Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 14.

<sup>6</sup>Hwa Yol Jung, “The Orphic Voice and Ecology,” *Environmental Ethics* 3, winter 1981: 329–40.



in *Philosophy and Technology*, “The Genealogy of Technological Rationality in the Human Sciences.” There, he says, referring to our society, “We are coming close to the realization of that ancient prophetic warning of a Hindu sacred scripture: *I am my death*.”<sup>7</sup>

What label other than stark irrationality is it appropriate to apply to the political stance of so-called President Bush during his first term in office (I use the qualifier “so-called” by way of alluding to the illegitimacy of the procedure by which he was first designated President, a qualifier that I do not, alas, feel justified in using with respect to his second term), when he announced that he would not support the admittedly very feeble Kyoto Protocols because he thought that they would harm the United States economy? And yet, of course, many pundits and political scientists immediately opined that this was a rational political move on his part, which would be popular with his constituency. If, as more and more signals indicate with every passing day, the world as a whole is rapidly plunging into a disaster without exit by refusing to observe what Hwa Yol and Petee Jung have called, in a lovely turn of phrase, “ecopiety,”<sup>8</sup> the unquestioned leader among nations in the plunge up to now has been the United States. Its government’s steadfast advocacy of the anti-values identified by Professor Jung as individualism and speciesism has indeed taken us to the brink where our species itself will die, a victim of its speciesism.

The expression, “ecopiety,” of course conjures up another dimension of reality, the religious. Although to the best of my knowledge Hwa Yol Jung has not tried systematically to explore the as-yet-uncharted depths of radical evil, that is, a type of evil that would, if it exists, be located at a very different level of reality from that of banal, every-day evil-doing, that is unethical conduct. It seems to me that a case can be made for seeing salient features of contemporary politics in this light. In fact, as we know, cases of sorts have already been made along these lines: some warn of “the Great Satan,” others of an “axis of evil.” In philosophically pursuing and investigating the validity of these charges, it may be possible to establish links between the appearance of radical evil throughout history, but especially in our own time, and the ultimate triumph of irrationality to which I have been pointing. But that would take us in directions that lie beyond the scope of this paper. Meanwhile, we are still entitled to hope against hope that “Toward the New Humanism: The Politics of Civility in a ‘No-Growth’ Society” to which Hwa Yol and Petee Jung allude in one of their best co-authored articles,<sup>9</sup> may yet prevail. After all, if irrationality is indeed as all-pervasive as I have been contending, if instances of “p&~p” are found to co-exist in abundance, like rabbits, in our political life today, then, following the illogical logic of the formal logicians, anything at all is possible.

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<sup>7</sup>Hwa Yol Jung, “The Genealogy of Technological Rationality in the Human Sciences,” *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 9 (1989): 59.

<sup>8</sup>Hwa Yol Jung and Petee Jung, “The Way of Ecopiety: A Philosophical Minuet for Ecological Ethics,” in David W. Black, ed., *Commonplaces* (London: University Press of America, 1989), 81–99.

<sup>9</sup>Hwa Yol Jung and Petee Jung, “Toward the New Humanism: The Politics of Civility in a ‘No-Growth’ Society,” *Man and World* 9 (August 1976): 283–306.



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