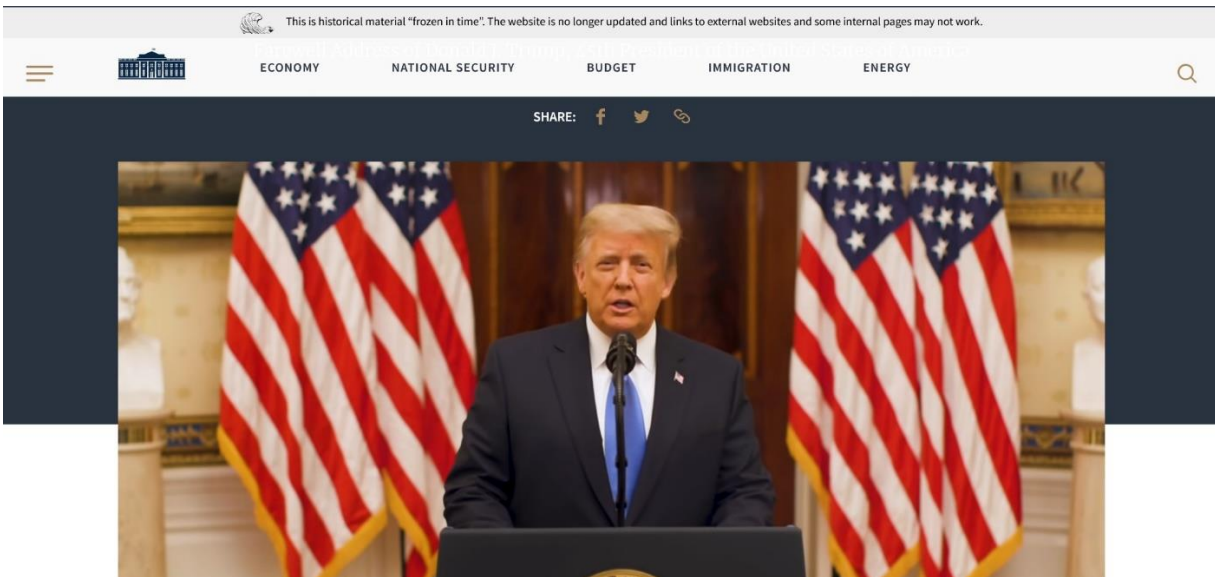


Misology *versus* Irrationality: The Case of Recidivist Trump Voters in 2024

Robert Hanna



Donald Trump's Farewell Address at the White House (US National Archives, 2021)

In Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedo*, *Laches*, and *Republic*, Socrates warns his interlocutors about the dangers of misology. Misology is explained by analogy with misanthropy, not as the hatred of other human beings, but as the hatred of the *logos* or reasonable discourse. According to Socrates, misology arises when a person alternates between believing an argument to be correct, and then refuting it as false. If Socrates is right, then misanthropy is sometimes instilled when a person goes from trusting people to learning that others sometimes betray our reliance and expectations, and finally not to placing any confidence whatsoever in other people, or, in the case of misology, in the correctness or trustworthiness of arguments. A cynical indifference to the soundness of arguments generally is sometimes associated with Socrates' polemical targets, the Sophists, at least as Plato represents Socrates' reaction to these itinerant teachers of rhetoric, public speaking and the fashioning of arguments suitable to any occasion. Socrates' injunctions against misology are largely moral, pronouncing it "shameful" and "very wicked," and something that without further justification we must "guard against," maintaining that we will be less excellent persons if we come to despise argument as lacking the potential of leading to the truth. (Jacquette, 2014: abstract)

Repeat-offender Trump voters in 2024 are greatly mistaken in their moral and sociopolitical views, but they are *not* irrational. On the contrary, instead they're engaged

in *misology*, which Socrates characterized as “the hatred of the *logos* or reasonable discourse” (Jacquette, 2013; see Plato, *Phaedo* 89d–91c, *Republic* 411c4–e3, and *Laches* 188c). Flouting Gricean rules of conversation (Grice, 1967/1989), as well as falsity, inconsistency, and fallacious thinking or talking more generally, are all privations of the good of human moral and logical rationality, or even outright violations of universal canons or principles of human moral and logical rationality, and therefore bad (Hanna, 2006a, 2006b). Why are some people misologists? Socrates’s diagnosis is by analogy with misanthropy:

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Dale Jacquette disagrees with Socrates’s diagnosis, and instead

conclude[s] that misology as Socrates intends the concept is an emotional reaction to argumentation on the part of persons who have not acquired the logical dialectical skills or will to sort out good from bad arguments. (Jacquette, 2014: abstract)

By contrast to Socrates and Jacquette alike, my own diagnosis is that the principal cause of misology is people’s *ethical egoism*, which says that the highest human good is the pursuit of self-interest, together with a *purely instrumental conception of human rationality* (which I’ll define later in the essay), the conjunction of which which leads them to abuse and misuse their innate capacities for moral reasoning and logical reasoning. More specifically, misologists are *moral and logical opportunists* who hate, reject, and violate universal canons or principles of human moral and logical rationality precisely because they run contrary to their own self-perceived self-interest.

Using recidivist Trump voters in 2024 as a case study, the overall aim of this essay is twofold: **first**, to distinguish sharply between misology and irrationality, and **second**, to argue for the elimination of the very idea of “irrationality,” as a confused and even counterproductive concept. For *not only* does the very idea of “irrationality” run together (i) *non-rationality*, i.e., the non-possession, permanent destruction, or temporary deprivation of our basic capacities for human moral and logical rationality, and (ii) *privations of the good of human rationality that are still minimally rational*, for example, *misology*, in that we still possess the basic capacities for human moral and logical rationality, even if we abuse or misuse those capacities, hence that very idea really represents nothing determinate at all. *But also*, when the concept of “irrationality” is applied to others, this application refuses to treat them as even minimally rational and instead treats them as enemies of rationality itself, and therefore preemptively shuts down rational

conversation with them, our mutual education, and the rational progress in thinking, feeling, and acting that Immanuel Kant rightly called “enlightenment” (Kant, 1784/1996).

In a pre-Presidential-primaries survey of Republican voters in January 2024, people were asked, “Will You Vote for Trump Again?” One respondent said this:

“Without a doubt, I’m with Trump.” There is a certainty in Jan Altena’s voice, something he attributes to his belief that Mr. Trump “owes nobody anything.”

“He might have a hard time getting a caucus together, he can’t get deals with people, but he’s got principles, that’s the key feature there,” said Mr. Altena, a 69-year-old retired entrepreneur, father of four and grandfather of nine.

Mostly, Mr. Altena, who lives in Orange City, a rural part of the state, wants to see a return to what he describes as conservative values of morality, which is unlikely to ever come from Washington, he said. “Improvements that have come to our culture haven’t come from government, but from the free market and ideas. You have to believe in morality, you can’t legislate it.”

The real question, Mr. Altena said, is: “Which comes first, the morality in ourselves or in politics?”

When his wife recently said that their parents had lived through “the Golden Age,” he heartily agreed. “There are not people standing up for ethical views anymore. During the Reagan years there was potential, but I think that was never the dominant worldview. We need to be praying for God’s revival.” (NYT, 2024)

These remarks, you might be tempted to think, are an epitome of *human irrationality*. For it’s self-evident to any reasonable person who has been following sociopolitics in the USA for the past 10 years, that Donald Trump is a neo-fascist neoliberal, and a psychological and ethical egoist, fundamentally interested in pursuing only his own self-perceived self-interest, no matter what the consequences—indeed, he’s clearly a narcissist—and without a doubt the worst President in US history, who multiply and repeatedly violated his Oath of Office, and fomented rebellion in January 2021 in a failed attempt to overturn the results of the Fall 2020 Presidential election. And he’s a world class Master of Misology. So how could any reasonable person vote for Trump again?

But when Mr Altena said that

[Trump] might have a hard time getting a caucus together, he can’t get deals with people, but he’s got principles, that’s the key feature there (NYT, 2024),

he must have meant that Trump has *ethical egoist principles* and *neoliberal principles*, an interpretation which coheres with his subsequent remarks about morality and politics:

[Mr Altena] wants to see a return to what he describes as conservative values of morality, which is unlikely to ever come from Washington, he said. “Improvements that have come to our culture haven’t come from government, but from the free market and ideas. You have to believe in morality, you can’t legislate it.... There are not people standing up for ethical views anymore. During the Reagan years there was potential, but I think that was never the dominant worldview. We need to be praying for God’s revival.” (NYT, 2024)

Now, in my opinion, a purely instrumental conception of human rationality, which in turn grounds the very ideas of ethical egoism and neoliberalism—i.e., the personal, social, and political, or even theological, valorization of capitalism, together with a belief in the what Mark Fisher aptly called “capitalist realism,” i.e., the supposed immutability, inevitability, and ultimacy of capitalist values (Fisher, 2009)—are all profoundly and self-evidently *false* (Hanna, 2023a, 2023b). But even if all these views *are* profoundly and self-evidently false, they *aren’t* irrational, and Mr Altena is *not* irrational for holding them. He’s greatly mistaken in his moral and sociopolitical views; and what’s even worse, he’s a *MAGA-hat-wearing misologist*; but he’s not irrational.

Irrationality, supposedly, is *the contrary of human rationality*, and human rationality is assumed to be an inherently good thing; hence—if irrationality really exists—then it’s the same as the fact or phenomenon of *human unreason* or *human anti-reason*, and supposedly it’s also an inherently bad thing that should always be criticized. Indeed, there’s even a much-touted 2019 book to that effect by Justin E.H. Smith, called *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Human Reason*, as per the following book blurb:

It’s a story we can’t stop telling ourselves. Once, humans were benighted by superstition and irrationality, but then the Greeks invented reason. Later, the Enlightenment enshrined rationality as the supreme value. Discovering that reason is the defining feature of our species, we named ourselves the “rational animal.” But is this flattering story itself rational? In this sweeping account of irrationality from antiquity to today—from the fifth-century BC murder of Hippasus for revealing the existence of irrational numbers to the rise of Twitter mobs and the election of Donald Trump—Justin Smith says the evidence suggests the opposite. From sex and music to religion and war, irrationality makes up the greater part of human life and history.

Rich and ambitious, *Irrationality* ranges across philosophy, politics, and current events. Challenging conventional thinking about logic, natural reason, dreams, art and science, pseudoscience, the Enlightenment, the internet, jokes and lies, and death, the book shows how history reveals that any triumph of reason is temporary and reversible, and that

rational schemes, notably including many from Silicon Valley, often result in their polar opposite. The problem is that the rational gives birth to the irrational and vice versa in an endless cycle, and any effort to permanently set things in order sooner or later ends in an explosion of unreason. Because of this, it is irrational to try to eliminate irrationality. For better or worse, it is an ineradicable feature of life.

Illuminating unreason at a moment when the world appears to have gone mad again, *Irrationality* is fascinating, provocative, and timely. (Smith, 2019)

But, sadly, this is nothing but conceptual confusion and bullshit.

For there's a fundamental conceptual confusion in orthodox, standard thinking about human rationality and so-called human irrationality, between (i) human *possession* of the basic cognitive, emotive, and action-oriented *capacities* for moral and logical thinking: call that *low-bar rationality*, and (ii) *using those capacities successfully and well*, all the way up to some ideally perfect standard: call that *high-bar rationality* (Hanna, 2006a, 2015). Elsewhere, I've called this the fact of *two-dimensional rational normativity* (Hanna, 2015: pp. 19-21). Now, when human animals fall below the requirements for low-bar rationality, because, owing to some natural defect or other accident, either they simply lack all or some of the basic capacities, or else those capacities have been permanently damaged, then those human animals are *not* irrational, they're *non-rational*, and there's nothing that can be cogently criticized. Moreover, simply because all human animals are, from the biological and existential get-go, "human, all-too-human" — i.e., finite, fallible, and thoroughly normatively imperfect in every other way too — no human animal is even in principle capable of achieving ideally perfect high-bar rationality. Hence the fact that human animals always fall short of that impossibly high standard *isn't* irrationality, it's just being "human, all-too-human," and again there's nothing that can be cogently criticized.

Then, all that's left over beyond the domain of the humanly *non-rational* is an unrestrictedly large domain of acts of thinking, judging, inferring, desiring, evaluating, choosing, and acting, all of which are carried out by human animals who are rational in the low-bar sense, in that they do indeed possess the basic capacities constitutive of low-bar rationality, and also they are doing any or all these things, in context, more-or-less successfully or well, across an infinitely wide range of degrees. And of course not only can people be legitimately criticized for doing any or all of these things *less* successfully or well than they are *capable* of doing them, but also—leaving aside contextual and contingent accidents or constraints over which they have no control—they are themselves, and can also be held, causally and morally *responsible* for falling more or less short of what they're capable of doing—as, for example, in the case of the MAGA-hat-

wearing misology of recidivist Trump voters in 2024. But *none* of that is irrationality: it's simply an infinitely wide range of degrees of lesser or greater human accomplishment, in context.

So, to use Smith's book-blurb's supposedly obvious examples of the irrationality of "the rise of Twitter mobs and the election of Donald Trump," and also the supposedly obvious example of the irrationality of recidivist Trump voters in 2024 like Mr Altena, *either* (i) these Twitter-mobbing, Trump-electing, and Trump-voter-recidivist human animals fall below the level of low-bar rationality, in which case they cannot be cogently criticized, because they're non-rational, *or else* (ii) they *can* be cogently criticized, but *only* for using their basic capacities for human rationality more or less unsuccessfully or badly, for which they not only are themselves, but also can be held, causally and morally responsible. Nevertheless, *neither* the Twitter-mobs, *nor* the Trump-electors in 2016, *nor* the recidivist Trump voters in 2024, are irrational. Again, *either* (i) they're non-rational, *or else* (ii) they're low-bar rational, and of course falling short of ideally perfect rationality, and "human, all-too-human," just like all of us, and they're *also* more or less unsuccessfully and badly using their basic capacities for human moral and logical rationality, just like many or most of us, most of the time—for example, by being misologists—and correspondingly they're cogently criticizable to that extent, just like many or most of us, most of the time *Clearly*, in the cases of the Twitter mobs, the Trump-electors, and the Trump-voter-recidivists in 2024, it's (ii); but calling all those folks *irrational* is nothing but sanctimoniously abusive *ad hominem* rhetoric, i.e., bullshit (Frankfurt, 1988).

In this connection, there's also another crucial distinction that's often overlooked or avoided in orthodox, standard treatments of rationality and so-called irrationality, between (i) *instrumental rationality*, i.e., consequentialist reasoning, aka *hypothetically imperative* reasoning (of the form: "if you desire/want X as an end, then you ought to choose and do Y, as the means to X"), governed by either (ia) *egoistically* consequentialist and decision-theoretic, or (ib) *publicly* consequentialist and Utilitarian, *hypothetically universal* normative principles or rules, and (ii) *non-instrumental rationality*, i.e., *non-consequentialist* reasoning, aka *categorically imperative* reasoning (of the form: "since it's primitively given that X is *the highest good for rational humanity*, then everyone ought always to choose and act *according to and for the sake of X*, whatever the consequences"), governed by a set of *absolutely universal* normative principles or rules (Hanna, 2018a, 2018b). Instrumental rationality and its instrumental values are perfectly acceptable and unproblematic *if and only if* they're restricted to an appropriately narrow domain of applications—for example, building bridges, everyday small-scale economic transactions, or playing *Monopoly*. But if instrumental rationality and instrumental value are valorized, universalized, and held to be the fundamental kinds of rationality and

value, such that every other kind of rationality and value is reducible to them—let’s call that *the attempted totalization* of instrumental rationality and instrumental value—then theoretical paradoxes, practical disasters, moral disasters, and sociopolitical catastrophes inevitably follow. More specifically, here are four sound arguments against the attempted totalization of instrumental rationality and instrumental value.

First, the attempt to reduce categorical obligation (the absolute “ought”) to contingent, natural facts about instrumental obligation (the conditional “is”) is self-refuting—that’s one formulation of what’s known as *the naturalistic fallacy* (Hanna, 2018b: section 1.5, 2022).

Second, on the legitimate assumption that every actual and possible instrumental value is expressible as a rational number quantity (whether finite or denumerably infinite), then it can be shown by Georg Cantor’s diagonalization method for demonstrating the existence of transfinite (aka “transcendental”) numbers (Cantor, 1891, 2019), that there has to be at least one non-instrumental, nondenumerably infinite, intrinsic, objective value that transcends every actual and possible instrumental value—let’s call any such transfinite value *a transcendental value*, and let’s call the unified system of all such transcendental values *the highest good*—and therefore the attempted totalization of instrumental rationality and instrumental value is again self-refuting (Hanna, 2018b, 2023a).

Third, since instrumental rationality and instrumental value presuppose the existence of rational human animals, i.e., *human persons*, who at least sometimes act according to this specific kind of human rationality and this specific kind of human value, but (i) all human persons have *dignity*, and (ii) every person’s dignity has a transcendental value that belongs to the highest good, and (iii) as a consequence no one, not even the most egoistic human person, can rationally consent to *themselves* being arbitrarily treated like a mere means or mere thing—i.e., like something with a merely instrumental value—then (iv) the attempted totalization of instrumental rationality and instrumental value is yet again self-refuting (Hanna, 2018b, 2023a).

Fourth and finally, as various members of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School of critical theory (Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and so-on) have brilliantly argued—for example, in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944/2002), Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* (Horkheimer, 1947), and Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964)—the worldwide attempt, since at least the 17th century, to bring about a real-world totalization of instrumental rationality and instrumental value via the modern State (whether liberal or totalitarian), via modern science (especially via its mechanistic

worldview and its technocracy), and via capitalism (especially via advanced or late capitalism and neoliberalism), universally adversely affects and indeed disastrously frustrates basic human needs, and also systematically undermines and violates human dignity (Hanna, 2023b). Hence the attempted totalization of instrumental rationality and instrumental value is not only theoretically paradoxical, but also practically disastrous, morally disastrous, and sociopolitically catastrophic. But that's *not* irrationality, that's merely the self-refuting and malign consequences of the attempted totalization of instrumental rationality and instrumental value.

Therefore, even despite the profoundly and self-evidently false views of recidivist Trump voters in 2024, and even despite their morally and logically culpable MAGA-hat-wearing misology, there's really no such thing as irrationality, and all that conventionally-wise talk about the so-called irrationality of other people by famous or not-so-famous people who ought to know better, is nothing but conceptual confusion and bullshit. Moreover and finally, as a consequence, what's even worse, it thereby turns out that the much-used term "irrational" is nothing but a sanctimoniously abusive rhetorical stick to beat other people with, if you don't like them personally, or if you dislike their skin pigmentation, their gender, their sexual preferences, their economic or social class, their ethnicity, their culture, their social institutions, their morality, or their politics—it preemptively shuts down the possibility of rational conversation with them, our mutual education, and the rational progress in thinking, feeling, and acting that Kant rightly called "enlightenment" (Kant, 1784/1996). And that's itself a cogently criticizable misuse of your own basic capacities for human rationality. Therefore, not only ought we to eliminate the very idea of "irrationality," but also, at the same time, we should wholeheartedly fight the good fight against misology.¹

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