Understanding Houyhnhnm Reason, Its Limitations, and What Fills The Void

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Many early modern thinkers, including John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, have argued that the concept of rational behavior is critical to our understanding of what it is to be human. Our ability for logic and fact-based decisions forms the basis for many of our institutions and interactions. The opposite, irrationality, can be characterized by many evocative words—emotions, intuition, feeling, desire—but the term is fundamentally defined in an early modern context as a lack of concrete reason. Locke writes at the outset of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689) that mankind has made all its discoveries through the use of reason (Locke 1.1.8). In Leviathan, Hobbes, though he embraces a somewhat different understanding of the term, writes in 1651, “the name body is of larger signification than the word man, and comprehendeth it, and the names man and rational are of equal extent, comprehending mutually one another” (Hobbes 21). Where Hobbes was writing from a more pessimistic stance than Locke, both philosophers look to reason or rationality—which both have rich etymologies, but will be treated as largely synonymous in this thesis—as the core concept when thinking about the unique quality of human beings.¹

The fourth book in Jonathan Swift’s Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships, which is commonly known as Gulliver’s Travels (1726), describes a land of hyper-rational horse creatures known as Houyhnhnms and is often read as a satirical treatise on the limits and possibilities of rational government in society. Through the betrayal of his crew, the English traveler Gulliver

¹ It also makes sense because, while small differences could be considered between the two terms, the Houyhnhnms and Gulliver use them to refer to the broad concept of entire species. It is possible to consider some small differences between the two terms. For example, reason is based on the “process of thinking” and because of this it is a much more conscious concept than rationality, which is “endowed with reason.” For the purposes of this paper, reason and rationality will be considered the same, especially since they generally are in Gulliver’s Travels and much of the accompanying criticism.
arrives in the land of the Houyhnhnms, a race of intelligent horses governed in theory solely via their reason and rationality. Before long, he not only admires them, but idolizes them, attempting to emulate them in every aspect possible and willingly abandoning any desire to return to England. When he is finally forced to do just that, he loses the ability to communicate with the rest of humanity, preferring instead to sleep in the stables and pass his days in a misanthropic melancholy: “in such a Solitude as I desired, I could at least enjoy my own Thoughts, and reflect with Delight on the Virtues of those inimitable Houyhnhnms, without any Opportunity of degenerating into the Vices and Corruptions of my own Species” (Swift 493). Upon leaving Houyhnhnmland, Gulliver would rather spend the remainder of his life in complete isolation than face other humans again. These fears are heightened for him by the Yahoos. The Yahoos are human in appearance, but do not appear to have any rational sentiments and are instead governed entirely by instinct and emotion. While Gulliver fears “degenerating into the Vices and Corruptions” of Yahoos, he ultimately cannot even do that when he returns. His ability to interact with his own species—in virtuous or nasty ways—is entirely removed.

While many read Gulliver’s odd withdrawal as the mark of the hyper-rational denigrated by human and Yahoo animality, the “rational” basis of the Houyhnhnms society is not a simple pretense for critiquing British society. In his letters to Alexander Pope, Swift discusses the desire to “go on till I have done with them. I have got Materials Towards a Treatis proving the falsity of that Definition animal rationale; and to show it should be only rationis capax” (Swift 676). The difference between the two concepts, as Frank Palmeri explains, is that Swift wants to show that humans are not rational animals, but animals only capable of rationality (Palmeri 2, emphasis mine). While this may not appear to be a significant distinction, it has far reaching effects on how we judge human culpability. If Swift is right and humans are only capable of reason and not
inherently rational, then how can societies expect rationality from all of their citizens? And how could two people trust each other if they cannot believe in a certain degree of mutual rationality? These are key questions because these interactions and agreements between people are what many believe shapes society as a whole. In this pursuit, the text juxtaposes the hyper-rational Houyhnhnms with the humans, who at many points appear only as *rationis capax*. In this subtle but critical distinction, *Gulliver’s Travels* demonstrates that only when a society’s capacity for rationality is fallible, is it capable of a profitable community enterprise complete with technological advancements and exploration. Swift’s work, as he admits in his narrator’s separate discussion of *rationis capax* is a “Treatis” that attempts to clarify the effects of too much rationality on society.

Most critically, the Houyhnhnms became trapped in a solipsistic space because they lack the ability to engage otherness. Gulliver’s move to a similarly ethnocentric perspective by the end of his journey causes a number of problems. He does not simply adopt a different race from his own, he also adopts their principles, which in this case are radically unobtainable. While the English can be characterized as explorers and conquerors, the Houyhnhnms are nothing of the sort. Gulliver’s ethnocentrism in imitation of the Houyhnhnms’ points to the drawbacks of absolute rationality, emphasizing the dark side of that fantasy.

With any satire, the most basic question the reader might ask is what is being satirized? Critics have accused Gulliver of being a number of things, including gullible, as his name would suggest, and misanthropic. Throughout the first three books of the *Travels*, however, Gulliver also shows ample evidence of being a rational creature (Clark 10). He has the urge to strike down a number of Lilliputians, but thinks better of it for fear of the consequences. He talks his way out of many bad situations, including losing the favor of the queen in Lilliput or being the target of
an angry dwarf in Brobdingnag. He is even willing to offend in service of the greater good, putting out a palace fire by urinating on it. He reflects, “although I had done a very eminent piece of service, yet I could not tell how his majesty might resent the manner by which I had performed it: for, by the fundamental laws of the realm, it is capital in any person, of what quality soever, to make water within the precincts of the palace” (Swift 349). Even facing punishment for a good deed, Gulliver understands rationally the case against him. In every country he visits before Houyhnhnmland, in fact, he primarily plays the role of a conversational observer, one who engages in debate and discussion. Upon his arrival in Book II’s Brobdingnag, Gulliver speculates, “The farmer by this time was convinced I must be a rational Creature” (Swift 370). This is notable as the farmer, at this point, had only just met Gulliver.

When Gulliver joins the Houyhnhnms in Book IV, however, he is no longer the rational outside observer, but the representative of a comparably irrational race. As Gulliver attempts to prove his own rationality to his new “master,” we see him for the first time as rationis capax as opposed to animal rationale. This difference is the cornerstone of what the fourth voyage of Gulliver's Travels does. It proves that human beings are not the rational animals that they are assumed to be, but in fact only animals that are capable of reason. Using the word “animal” for a human being is complex, yet fitting because historically the term has been used both to represent all living beings, but also to mark what is other than human. Both definitions predate Swift, though the “all living creatures” definition first came into use in the fourteenth century, about two hundred years before the other. The OED notes that both forms were used by Shakespeare (“Animal, N.”). In Hamlet, Hamlet asks, “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals”
(Shakespeare, *Hamlet* II.ii.302-308). In *As You Like It*, Orlando uses the term as a comparative saying, “For the which his Animals on his dunghils are as much bound to him as I” (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, I.i.14). Swift appears most often to use the term in the older way—to designate all beings. The alternate meaning is important in the fourth voyage, however, because of the way Gulliver juxtaposes human and non-human forms and mental their acuities.

The problem of what is human versus what is animal is further compounded by the Houyhnhnm’s inability to recognize other positive aspects of humanity and to exercise humane qualities themselves. The Houyhnhnms are beyond normal rationality: they are completely rational actors, devoid of any other mechanism for decision making. They have set up a society that Gulliver claims is entirely rational and utopian, but it becomes clear at a number of points that such an ideal civilization is fundamentally impossible to construct even theoretically. In addition to other constraints, the inhabitants would have to be homogenous in their ideas and goals, a requirement that introduces an entirely different set of problems for a society that is meant to have advanced thought and discourse between its highest castes. As well, the Houyhnhnms lack any number of tendencies and institutions that are uniquely human. Such fraught institutions could introduce irrational elements into human society, thus forcing its inhabitants to occasionally act according to ideas lacking in reason and instead rich in emotions and intuition.

As this thesis will be primarily concerned with the topics of reason and rationality, it is important to develop strong definitions of both terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term “rational” variably, but most constructions have to do directly with reason: “Having the faculty of reasoning; endowed with reason. Esp. in rational being, rational creature, rational soul, etc.” (1398-present). The term also depends on its oppositions: “Based on or derived from reason
or reasoning, esp. as opposed to emotion, intuition, instinct, etc.” (OED “Rational, Adj. and Adv.”). The second definition is of particular importance because it begins to explain what can actually be gained in the spaces around reason, specifically the turn to “emotion, intuition, [and] instinct.” Some of the definitions for reason also reference rationality: “The intellectual power, the capacity for rational thought, and related senses.” (1225-present) One of the more in depth explanations, however, notes, “The power of the mind to think and form valid judgements by a process of logic; the mental faculty which is used in adapting thought or action to some end; the guiding principle of the mind in the process of thinking. Freq. contrasted with will, imagination, passion, etc” (1225-present, OED “Reason, n.1”). This contrast between “will, imagination, [and] passion,” and pure reason provides further insight into the power of leavening the rational with its affective and creative other. One must be able to feel, to see beyond the alien in the other, to recognize a separate living subject deserving of rights and civic engagement. Houyhnhnms are supposedly entirely devoid of the quality and therefore completely incapable of seeing other beings as equal.

Setting Up the Voyage of Gulliver's Travels

The fourth voyage of Gulliver's Travels begins when Gulliver’s crew mutinies and abandons him in an uncharted land. He quickly meets the native inhabitants, the Houyhnhnms, which are horses with a similar intellectual capability as humans and a supposedly complete sense of rationality that is unimpaired by qualities such as emotion, intuition, and desire. He also encounters Yahoos, which are anatomically human, but without intelligence. He recognizes intelligence in the Houyhnhnms and soon learns their language. He quickly accepts them as a higher form of being and decides to stay with them forever. These plans are changed, however,
when he becomes the catalyst for a Houyhnhnm decision to castrate, and thus destroy, Gulliver and the Yahoo race, which the Houyhnhnms—and even at some points Gulliver—consider Gulliver’s species: “The Assembly did therefor [sic] exhort him, either to employ me like the rest of my Species, or command me to swim back to the Place from whence I came” (Swift 490). His master arranges his escape and he returns to England, where he avoids contact with humans, including his own family.

It is important to note in this account of the *Gulliver’s Travels* that while the Houyhnhnms can be understood to be *animal rationale*, the phrase *rationis capax* is not an adequate descriptor of the Yahoos. They are, in fact, completely devoid of all rationality and for that reason, exist on the perimeter of any argument about rationality in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Samuel Holt Monk’s description of them as “purely sensual” creatures, the opposite extreme of the Houyhnhnms is helpful because it provides a starting point for understanding what would govern a creature if not either uber-rationality or a capacity to be rational (Monk 66). If *rationis capax* is the better descriptor of human kind, it would make sense since people seem to be driven by their emotions and wants as much as by reason. Monk draws special attention to Swift’s *Thoughts on Various Subjects* (1706), published two decades before *Gulliver’s Travels*, where Swift writes, “The Stoical Scheme of supplying our Wants, by loping [sic] off our Desires, is like cutting off our Feet when we want Shoes” (Swift 702). Assuming he did not radically change his opinions, this would suggest that the author, not only argued for the existence of *rationis capax*, but in fact approved of it as well. That is to say, he and his texts seek to create the gap between capability and perfection, the capacity not to be only rational, but to admit the aporia that enables deception and innovation.
The critical debates concerning Swift’s connection with Gulliver have evolved over the centuries into roughly two distinct camps that have strongly influenced readings of the work as a whole. In 1965 James Clifford first drew a distinction between two types of Swift academics. The soft camp separated Lemuel Gulliver from his creator, painting the former as an extreme actor as much meant to parody the opposition to rational government as Gulliver directly did the regime itself. The hard camp, conversely, purposely conflated Gulliver with Swift the author, ascribing to both the extreme and misanthropic tendencies of Gulliver at the end of the fourth voyage. Both sides have strong arguments: Letters to Alexander Pope do seem to confirm that Swift had a somewhat misanthropic outlook on life, but Monk, writing in 1955, provides numerous distinctions between Gulliver’s political tendencies and Swifts’ (Monk 65). While debates concerning authorial intent are often dismissed, it is difficult to do that with Gulliver’s Travels because it is a satire that by definition is made to interact with the real world and real events. As Gulliver talks broadly about the use of rationality and reason in society, his words gesture towards specific people, groups, and institutions within an eighteenth-century political sphere. This interweaving of the fictional with the real means that considering Swift’s purpose in the writing is relevant to debate about the rational subject.

In “Battel [sic] of the Books” (1704), a short satire Swift wrote anonymously, he notes, “Satyr is a sort of glass wherein Beholders do generally discover every body’s Face but their Own; which is the chief Reason for that kind Reception it meets with in the World, and that so very few are offended with it” (Swift BB 95). In other words, it is easy to identify insults directed at others when reading a satire, but it is rarely intuitive to recognize those pointed at oneself. This brings up an interesting question of whether Swift ever saw himself in the mirror. If he did impart a portion of himself to Gulliver, did he consciously mock that as well, or was he blind to
the connections that could be made between, for example, his critique of literary culture and his own work? Arthur E. Case suggests that “it would be more accurate and more illuminating to call *Gulliver’s Travels* a politico-sociological treatise much of which is couched in the medium of satire” (Case 72).^2^ What is important is Case’s characterization of the work as “politico-sociological” because this is where an extended discussion of reason and rationality come into play.^3^

Ronald Crane picks up on the political and sociological questions, extending a reflection on satirical form to a discourse of rationality:

Gulliver, in other words, is only in part a reliable spokesman of his creator’s satire; he is also, and decisively at the end, one of the targets of that satire—a character designed to convince us, through his obviously infatuated actions, of the absurdity both of any view of man’s nature that denies the capacity of at least some men for rational and virtuous conduct, however limited this capacity may be, and of any view of the best existence for man that makes it consist in taking ‘reason alone’ as a guide. (Crane 233)

Gulliver is a character of “obviously infatuated actions” who performs both the absurdity of a society solely reliant on reason and one fundamentally devoid of it. The difficulty with Crane’s argument is that he sets up *Gulliver’s Travels* as a perfect dichotomy between a completely rational society and a completely irrational society, when in reality historical body politics like England fall somewhere in between. Even Gulliver realizes this in the preface to *Travels*, “A Letter from Capt. Gulliver, to His Cousin Sympon,” in which he writes, “And is there less probability in my account of the Houyhnhnms or Yahoos, when it is manifest as to the latter,

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^2^ This begins to entertain the problem of what genre of literary work *Gulliver’s Travels* really is, which has been written about considerably and is not the primary consideration of this thesis.

^3^ Swift certainly critiques individuals in *The Travels*. Claude Rawson and Ian Higgins note a number of places in the voyages to Lilliput and Laputa where Swift appears to be deliberately modelling one of his characters on a real life figure. For example, Charles I and James II in the description of the Big-Endians or Isaac Newton when describing the scientists on the floating island of Laputa above Balmbarbi (Swift 344 fn 8).
there are so many thousands even in this country, who only differ from their brother brutes in Houyhnhnmland, because they use a sort of jabber, and do not go naked? I wrote for their amendment, and not their approbation” (Swift 317). It is clear that Gulliver, writing after his travels are complete, has a deep contempt for his contemporaries. Gulliver now refers to their spoken words as “jabber,” even as he will demonstrate a strong gift himself for languages and a pride in his talent throughout the satire. Not only does he seem to know many European languages, he quickly learns the languages of the Lilliputians, Brobdingnagians, and Houyhnhnms. There is an implicit argument, since even the Houyhnhnms converse with one another, that Gulliver’s problem is not with dialogue or oral language itself, but with the empty uses to which it is put. Jabber is separated from intelligent discourse by the intent and purpose of it. It is also important that Gulliver restricts his critique to “so many thousands even in this country.” While he is referring to a large portion of England’s population, he is careful not to lump all people in the same class as the Yahoos. Here, we see the logic of rationis capax at work. Even Gulliver (after his experience) is willing to admit that many humans are capable of reason and are not part of the jabbering masses, he is just not willing to make reason a default quality of the human race.

As Robert Elliot notes, however, there is a major chronological problem with Gulliver’s narrative. The letter that begins The Travels is clearly written after the fourth voyage, and all of the journeys are written in past tense. Yet the first three voyages, Elliot writes, are not written in

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4 The gesture towards jabber is a possible reflection of the intellectual environment Swift was writing. More newspapers and pamphlets were printed every day with a large variety of opinions, many of which Swift thought were not worth the paper they were printed on. Gulliver was exposed in his own way to an explosion of information in his lifetime. He spent time in, and learned the languages of, many different societies, many of which were markedly different from his own. He was exposed to many ideas and ways of thinking, some of which, in his opinion, clearly dwarfed those of the English. (Damrosch 360)
the same misanthropic tone Gulliver uses at the end of the tale (Elliot 44). This, in part, contributes to the arguments that the protagonist’s character does not change throughout the work, but this is not nearly as important as what it means for understanding the rationality of Gulliver at the end. He is able, despite adopting the Houyhnhnm way and the illiteracy that goes along with that, to write *Gulliver’s Travels*—since the entire work is written in the first person past tense. Gulliver’s writing appears to take on the prevailing opinions of the past version of himself that he is writing about in a given section, regardless of when he is writing. Holding the work to such standards inevitably runs into difficulties, yet it is possible to construct an argument even within the confines of Gulliver’s world for why he writes the way he does about the first three voyages, seemingly devoid of the misanthropic characteristic of the final book. In Houyhnhnm-land, no one lies. They do not deceive each other in any way. They also do not have a written language, which means Gulliver would have no precedent on which to pattern a representation of a past self. With a language, a work like a diary or autobiography might track the evolution of a being’s personality over the course of its life, but in Houyhnhnm-land, it can only be recorded through memory, which is more likely to record notable states than the complete process of transformation. In “writing” the first three voyages, Gulliver might have been trying to preserve veracity, but reflecting the binary between his states of mind in his memory.

In Leo Damrosch’s biography of Swift, he argues that “Swift was the wittiest of men; Gulliver is humorless. Irony was a way of life for Swift, Gulliver is never ironic. And yet Gulliver seems *real*, in a way that suggests his creator identified with him and lived through the adventures with him” (Damrosch 359). Damrosch’s attempt to bridge the two camps leaves open the question of whether Swift emulated or mocked the rational society of the Houyhnhnms, but it
helps to pry apart the different aspects of Gulliver’s character. Gulliver, for example, regularly feels dwarfed throughout *Gulliver’s Travels*. He is first outnumbered by Lilliputians, then outsized by Brobdingnagians. In the third voyage he lives for a time with an island flying above him, which its ruler can “drop directly upon” any who defy him, and finally he is placed into the lowest slave caste of a supposedly superior society (Swift 421). Perhaps Swift was also dwarfed by the quickly expanding British Empire and its bureaucracy, which is why, as Damrosch says, Swift “identified with him [Gulliver] and lived through the adventures with him.”

When Gulliver enters Houyhnhnm society, he begins by impartially reporting on the appearance of the new species he has met and his surroundings, but before long he adopts a peculiar ethnocentrism that is a central part of the Houyhnhnm society. If he did view the world and his adventures from a British perspective before, that outlook is gone by the end of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Gulliver wallows in sadness or madness for the rest of his days, pining for the lost Houyhnhnm society. He does not try to better human society by the introduction of a more Houyhnhnm way of life, and there is a reason for that. The ethnocentrism that is endemic to Houyhnhnm society comes from the *animal rationale* nature of the horse utopians such that it is impossible to even imagine a human society with a similarly insular and closed rationality. Gulliver’s attempt to become a completely rational animal leaves him incapable of communicating in a meaningful way with his own people, but he also never achieves the degree of rationality that the Houyhnhnms perform. He is stuck between the two worlds with no way to

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5 It is notable that Swift did not originally publish *Gulliver’s Travels* under his own name. Instead, he dropped the first voyage off in the dead of night with a letter supposedly from a cousin of Gulliver’s, Richard Sympson. Through letters and messengers, he and the publisher, Benjamin Motte, still ignorant that Jonathan Swift was the real author, agreed on payment and transferred the remaining three voyages (Damrosch 381). By doing this, Swift distanced himself from Gulliver, suggesting that whatever parts of the two characters might be the same, they were not originally meant to be read as Swift.
interact with humans on a purely rational level, but also no way to reacquire the emotions and instincts that are unique to humankind. His embrace of pure reason in essence denies him a capacity for rational behavior that allows, in its breadth, the vision and empathy to counteract Houyhnhnm ethnocentrism.

Clement Hawes counters the argument that Gulliver is not so much a character, but a “vehicle” for the political satire of Swift. He suggests that Gulliver is in fact a cohesive character, one who gets colonized by the Houyhnhnms: “Gulliver, the English narrator, is himself colonized. Since the reader is so positioned by the conventions of first-person narrative as to identify more or less closely with Gulliver, he or she likewise undergoes an increasingly painful confrontation with the experience of the colonized” (Hawes 189). Gulliver cannot recover from his colonized state when he returns to England. He cannot regain the ability to enact and interact with the ideas and institutions that were lost. Hawes’ argument that the colonization effect is transferred to the reader is useful. Unlike Gulliver, however, the reader does not become stuck because she can still function within a more comparative paradigm.

What Constitutes A Kiss? Finding What the Other Lacks

Charles Lawson, discussing the phenomenon of teaching Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Maddening Crowd* in a Nigerian school, focuses on the difficulty of analyzing and discussing the romantic scenes, the characters that got “flustered when they kissed,” to a group of students who culturally did not kiss and in fact did not understand the meaning of the word (Larson 464). Lawson’s perspective is interesting because he does not meditate so much on why the students had difficulty explaining what the physical act was. The real problem, he suggests, came with the question, “How was one to read a Thomas Hardy novel with all those frustrated kisses without
ever having been kissed?” (Larson 464) In other words, without the shared experience and culture, could a set of Nigerian school students ever even understand the way British people read that passage, no less engage with it in a similar way themselves?

This problem is similar to that introduced by the Houyhnhnms and, by extension, Gulliver’s idealized reading of their culture. Gulliver tries to explain human “irrationalities” to the horses, but they cannot understand. Gulliver has to go into great detail to lay out simple mechanics. Could these creatures ever understand the desire for legal recourse after having another individual steal your land? The pride of building up one’s own wealth? The unconditional love for a child? The answer, quite possibly, is no. More importantly, can such an understanding of things merely human still be expected of Gulliver upon his return? He hasn’t lost his memories, but if he’s forgotten the culturally shared feelings—for Lawson the feeling of “having been kissed”—can Gulliver ever come back to the human?

Hawes considers the effects of Houyhnhnms ethnocentrism, not just on Gulliver, but on Houyhnhnms society. He notes that humans are lacking as a species from the Houyhnhnms perspective: “It is a crucial point, and far more than a mere ‘limitation’ of the Houyhnhnms, that they display ‘equine chauvinism’ in discussion of Gulliver’s anatomy. The master Houyhnhnms, in fact, is as complacently ethnocentric as the average colonist. He sees only what Gulliver, in comparison with a Houyhnhnms, lacks” (Hawes 204). Gulliver’s master focuses on human deficiencies, but he is blind to what his own race lacks in comparison to Gulliver’s. He can only identify the physical impotence of humans and their comparative lack of reason. He cannot see the utility of human characteristics such as empathy and emotion.

The simplicity of Houyhnhnms society is critical to Swift’s work as a whole. It draws attention to the insular qualities of Houyhnhnms by making it clear that their society lacks a large
number of institutions that would depend on a more complex world view. It also, however, becomes unclear whether Swift is more in favor of the uber-rational, simplistic Houyhnhnm world or the messy human England, a conundrum that leads us back to the hard and soft interpretations of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Martin Kallich observes that “despite the author’s intent, ambiguities can be converted into crudely simple statements of belief—their original meanings so distorted that the satirist is charged with maintaining opinions directly the opposite of what he in reality professes” (Kallich 107). “Reality,” however, is ambiguous at best since the reader only really understands the two cultures with regard to what each lacks. Do they have elements in common? The following pages consider some of the largest absences in Houyhnhnm society: a recognition of government, writing, vice, and warfare. The description Gulliver gives of Houyhnhnmland is slanted and incomplete, so it is likely that many other components in Houyhnhnmland are missing, but these are those most noticeable given Gulliver’s account.

Given the relational, even oppositional, framework set up between the Houyhnhnms and England, it is curious that the Houyhnhnms have a government at all. The work of Thomas Hobbes discusses the origins and legitimization of governments extensively and serves as a strong starting point for an analysis of the Houyhnhnm form of governance. He describes governments as necessary evils for imperfect people, which makes his theories the perfect vehicle for analyzing the use of a representative government in Houyhnhnmland. While people without a government depend on “natural lust” and live in a “brutish manner,” (Hobbes 78) this is not a problem for the Houyhnhnms because they have no lust. Nor do the Houyhnhnms require a government. Hobbes also notes that governments force peace on mankind: “The passions that incline men to peace are: fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them” (Hobbes 79). The difficulty here is that the
Houyhnhnms do not have many fears, except for that of a possible Yahoo uprising, and they never seem to want for material possessions because what they need is provided.

The provision of such goods is accomplished by a rudimentary government. Although Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master goes on to criticize many of the trappings of human politics, his species has a representative government that argues the merits of rationality as well. If the beings are perfectly rational, they should not need to debate what is rational, it should be obvious. Hobbes' framework complicates matters further by arguing that governments encourage the negative societal actions that they are created to control: "For if we could suppose a great multitude of men to consent in the observation of justice, and other laws of nature, without a common power to keep them all in awe, we might as well suppose all mankind to do the same; and then there neither would be, nor need to be, any civil government or Commonwealth at all, because there would be peace without subjection" (Hobbes 104). This is a description of the animal rationale ideal. In essence, Hobbes says, if a group of men can be proven to be perfectly rational at all times, then it can be assumed that everyone would be, and then there would be no need for a government because there would be no anarchy to which an organized government would need to respond.

The Houyhnhnms believe this too. As Gulliver describes his Houyhnhnm master's opinions,

That, our [British] Institutions of Government and Law were plainly owing to our gross Defects in Reason, and by consequence, in Virtue; because Reason alone is sufficient to govern a Rational Creature; which was therefore a Character we had no Pretence to challenge, even from the Account had given of my own People; although he manifestly perceived, that in order to favour them, I had concealed many Particulars, and often said the Thing which was not. (Swift 477)

This quote follows a lengthy description of the English system of governance, which confuses the Houyhnhnm master on many counts. The Houyhnhnms would have Gulliver believe that
government is entirely unnecessary in a rational society, but we quickly learn that this is false. A governing council of Houyhnhnms does exist, and, while it cannot force particular decisions on the rest of society, it doesn’t need to because it is nearly always obeyed:

Every fourth year, at the Vernal Equinox, there is a Representative Council of the whole Nation, which meets in a Plain about twenty Miles from our House, and continueth about five or six Days. Here they inquire into the State and Condition of the several Districts; whether they abound or be deficient in Hay or Oats, or Cows or Yahoos? And where-ever there is any Want (which is but seldom) it is immediately supplied by unanimous Consent and Contribution. Here likewise the Regulation of Children is settled: As for instance, if a Houyhnhnm hath two Males, he changeth one of them with another who hath two Females: And when a Child hath been lost by any Casualty, where the Mother is past Breeding, it is determined what Family shall breed another to supply the loss. (Swift 484-485)

This description of the Houyhnhnm government depicts it as a mechanism for resource reallocation and nothing more, but it is in fact a government. It is representative and works on an informal system of taxation and public goods provision, which is a basic function of any government. This particular system lacks all concept of personhood and power, which is unique for a government, but it still performs the basic functions. Furthermore, it goes even farther than a human government would by taking actions such as the reallocation of children. Such a concept would be monstrous in most human societies, but in Houyhnhnmland, it is simply a different form of taxation. Such a tax further weakens the institution of the family for Houyhnhnms and reinforces the necessity of working to better society as a whole. Individual rights and freedoms do not exist because everything the government does is in service of the country as a whole. This makes a more rational society, but requires that each individual look past what is best for himself to what is best for their whole community. This is why things like lying, capitalism, and warfare do not exist in their society. They are institutions that benefit an individual or smaller subset of all people, but weaken the community.
Since personhood is not an imperative category in Houyhnhnmland, however, Gulliver glosses over the negative aspects of representative Houyhnhnm government. On closer study, the reader recognizes that the representatives are in fact only males of a specific caste:

HE made me observe, that among the *Houyhnhnms*, the *White*, the *Sorrel*, and the *Iron-grey*, were not exactly shaped as the *Bay*, the *Dapple-grey*, and the *Black*; nor born with equal Talents of Mind or a Capacity to improve them; and therefore continued always in the Condition of Servants, without ever aspiring to match out of their own Race, which in that Country would be reckoned monstrous and unnatural (Swift 475-476).

Gulliver points here, if indirectly, to two key flaws: that the representatives would most likely be drawn only from the highest race; and that there is no capacity for movement or improvement. We learn early on that Gulliver's master is a Dapple-grey, which, according to critics Claude Rawson and Ian Higgins was the most desired type of horse at the time of Swift's writing (Swift 476 fn. 8). Gulliver later expands to say that his master was chosen as the representative for their district during his time in Houyhnhnmland. Swift never elaborates on the electoral process, but it is likely that only members of these upper classes would be allowed to serve in this role. The caste system itself, which is based on mental acuity and superior genetics, is also a version of rational selection. Again, this method puts the needs of the many over the values of equality and innovation. Instead of assuming that every individual has the capability to do anything, selective breeding leading to a caste system makes it possible to predetermine jobs and training. This risks an unusually bright member of the lower castes going to waste, but in a society that prefers the status quo to rapid growth and change, that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Ian Higgins argues that Swift based the Houyhnhnm government on ancient Sparta because of its similar caste based system, which allowed for democracy among elite "philosopher-masters" but kept the other social groups separate and subservient. Higgins compares ancient Athens, in particular, to the England that Gulliver comes from, stressing the
chaos in both societies that arises from greater democracy. He also brings attention to the popularity of ancient Sparta at the time among English intellectuals (Higgins 516). The key point that Higgins makes in his work is that “Lycurgus ensured through his laws the political and social isolation and ethnocentrism of Sparta” (Higgins 527). Lycurgus’s Sparta did not have a currency in gold or silver and shunned everything foreign, including goods, people, and ideas. This kept the Spartan society perfectly uniform and, by a fluke of history and geography, it does the same for the Houyhnhnms. It would seem, then, that a utopian community ruled solely through Reason must be not only homogenous, but also resistant to foreign ideas to avoid any desire for change to the status quo. Such change would result in the need for debate, which by definition would result in an ideologically heterogeneous society.

The latter would be far from purely rational, which is the cornerstone of the Houyhnhnm view of the world because it would, engage creatively and emotionally in public discourse. The Houyhnhnms caste system in contrast is built on the hierarchy of mental capabilities. This, combined with the fact that the Houyhnhnms do in fact have a minimal system of government, suggests that no civilization, not even one full of animal rationale can possibly function in the utopian manner that Hobbes describes. They might resist public discourse by relying on narrow systems to select only the most rational voices, but even between these community members, a basic government is formed.

Perhaps the most puzzling omission in Houyhnhnm society is the lack of a written language. They have a race of elite philosophers who spend a majority of their time considering grand ideas, but never record any for future reference. Instead, an oral history is passed down, which puts limits on what information gets preserved between generations. Written philosophies and criticism about societies are an essentially human concept, each of which is built on and
made stronger by the body of literature as a whole. Houyhnhnms do not examine their existence in the way most modern humans do. We write histories down and use them to begin new avenues of study so that we can modify what is generally understood to be true. The Houyhnhnms, however, are only capable of discussing definitive facts and see no reason to investigate notions that do not have strictly true or false answers: “In the like manner, when I [Gulliver] used to explain to him [the Master] our several systems of natural philosophy, he would laugh, ‘that a creature pretending to reason, should value itself upon the knowledge of other people’s conjectures, and in things where that knowledge, if it were certain, could be of no use’” (Swift 482-483). Gulliver’s master does not look down upon philosophers the same way he does lawyers, but there is also a confusion as to why any being would devote energy solving a problem that does not have an answer.

Houyhnhnms also leave no record of these oral discussions. They might repeat the conversations of their ancestors without even knowing it. What they know of their predecessors is limited to what can be remembered via an oral history. Although no history can be considered completely accurate, oral histories would seem especially prone to problems, though one can idealize oral cultures too. Higgins notes that the more literate a civilization is in Gulliver’s Travels the more immoral it is as well. The Brobdingnagians only keep small libraries and the Houyhnhnms write nothing down at all (Higgins 523). As he describes English law to his Houyhnhnm master, Gulliver says, “It is a Maxim among these Lawyers, that whatever hath been done before, may legally be done again: And therefore they take special Care to record all the Decisions formerly made against common Justice and the General Reason of Mankind. These, under the Name of Precedents, they produce as Authorities to justify the most iniquitous Opinions; and the judges never fail of directing accordingly” (Swift 471). Limiting remembered
facts to a brief oral history (relative to European histories) is the only way for Houyhnhnms to protect against past decisions determining future ones and bad precedents shaping the future.

But there are negative consequences to not recording the past as well. From Gulliver’s description of the reallocation system, it would not matter if one district of the nation continuously came up short of a commodity, say Hay. They would always be given what they needed from the other districts. In a human system, however, that shortage of Hay would be noted. If another federal bailout were needed today similar to the 2008 one, it would most likely not be given, and, if it were, there would undoubtedly be stronger consequences. But in Houyhnhnms society, a recent allotment of resources would not affect a future need, partially because nothing about that first allotment would be recorded. Whatever was remembered would be disregarded by the Houyhnhnms as not being a rational part of the decision about whether or not to provide more goods. What is left, however, is a system incapable of anything other than self-sufficiency. Should they ever come into contact with another intelligent, rational group, they would have a very limited ability for trade. Additionally, they also lack the capitalist drive to better production methods and make scientific advances and defensive warfare.

In fact, Houyhnhnmland lacks any basic military capabilities, having no concept of war or fighting. Gulliver’s master is saddened to learn that humans had built the means to inflict great casualties on each other and is so dismayed that he orders Gulliver to stop describing English warfare at once. In the final chapter, Gulliver returns to the idea of a Houyhnhnms military when considering what would happen should an English army ever learn of the whereabouts of Houyhnhnmland:

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6 The maps at the beginning of the four parts of *Gulliver’s Travels* were not part of the original and were only added later, not by Swift (Damrosch).
The Houyhnhnms indeed appear not to be so well prepared for war, a science to which they are perfect strangers, and especially against missive weapons. However, supposing myself to be a minister of state, I could never give my advice for invading them. Their prudence, unanimity, unacquaintedness with fear, and their love of their country, would amply supply all defects in the military art. Imagine twenty thousand of them breaking into the midst of an European army, confounding the ranks, overturning the carriages, battering the warriors' faces into mummy by terrible yerks from their hinder hoofs. (Swift 500)

The claim made by Gulliver is that the Houyhnhnms could easily adapt to war, defending themselves as necessary, but this is an occasion where it would seem Gulliver's admiration goes too far. It is likely that should a group of seemingly wild horses charge an invading army, they might inflict some casualties, but against the war capabilities of even an eighteenth-century Europe, it seems unlikely that the Houyhnhnms would win a war. Europeans with swords could kill many Houyhnhnms and those armed with guns, even more. Additionally, while the Houyhnhnm intelligence might initially confuse invaders, said attackers would have considerable knowledge of a horse's anatomy.

There is also the question of whether the horses would decide to fight back. The Houyhnhnms are not pacifists (they are willing to castrate), they simply view violence as irrational. If, however, they were to encounter an aggressive other that could not be placated though other means, violence might be the most rational course of action. The Houyhnhnm ability to forgo war thus seems to be a direct result of no other intelligent species ever discovering them. Even if Gulliver were correct, and the Houyhnhnms could best any invading army, the experience would impact their culture profoundly, forcing them to defend against future attacks, which would necessitate the training and maintenance of an army or warrior caste.

The lack of a military and written history is symptomatic of a larger lack: Houyhnhnm society appears to be devoid of vices, such as lying, envy, and violence. Not only do they not
engage in such things, but they find the very concepts almost incomprehensible. One of the most perplexing problems is the idea of deception or lying, which the utopian creature must refer to as "the Thing which was not." This simplification of dishonesty is actually the basis for Locke's definition of reason and rationality:

How many instances of the use of reason may we observe in children, a long time before they have any knowledge of this maxim, "That it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be?" And a great part of illiterate people and savages pass many years, even of their rational age, without ever thinking on this and the like general propositions. I grant, men come not to the knowledge of these general and more abstract truths, which are thought innate, till they come to the use of reason; and I add, nor then neither. (Locke 1.1.12)

Here, Locke argues that the maxim, "That it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be" is the basis for all rationality one must understand both options, however, must recognize what a lie looks like. This understanding is usually subconscious and is often not considered until deeper questions about reason and rationality are asked, but it serves as an important foundation.

In contrast, the Houyhnhnms appear to think in strict binaries, but can only engage one half. Either something is or it is not. A creature is either entirely rational or irrational. This is why the arrival of Gulliver, an intelligent Yahoo, causes them so much vexation and, with the exception of Gulliver's master, eventually leads the Houyhnhnms to simply lump him in with the other Yahoos.

Gulliver's opinion of lying is also transformed by his experience of Houyhnhnmland. Discussing the veracity of his account, he writes, "I imposed on myself as a Maxim, never to be swerved from, that I would strictly adhere to the Truth; neither indeed can I be ever under the least Temptation to vary from it, while I retain in my Mind the Lectures and Example of my noble Master, and the other illustrious Houyhnhnms, of whom I had so long the Honour to be an humble Hearer" (Swift 499). He offers this as a proof of the veracity of the entirety of Gulliver's
Travels. This proof is, of course, circular, but it is helpful to understand the extent to which Gulliver embraces the concepts he finds in Houyhnhnmland. Gulliver can “never be swerved,” but he still makes the conscious choice to be honest, which is a decision Houyhnhnms never have to make. More importantly, Gulliver is motivated to tell the truth by his goal of reaching the Houyhnhnm ideal, whereas the Houyhnhnms do it naturally.

The question of Houyhnhnm veracity and their inability to lie returns to the ideas of rationis capax and animal rationale. An animal rationale is only ever capable of rationality, which makes the human rationis capax incomprehensible to them. Gulliver’s Houyhnhnm master, for example, places a larger degree of responsibility on humans than Yahoos because humans have some reasoning aptitude:

he had no more blamed them [the Yahoos] for their odious Qualities, than he did a Gnnayh (a Bird of Prey) for its Cruelty, or a sharp Stone for cutting his Hoof. But, when a Creature pretending to Reason, could be capable of such Enormities, he dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality itself. He seemed therefore confident, that instead of Reason, we were only possessed of some Quality fitted to increase our natural Vices. (Swift 470)

The Houyhnhnm contents himself with the notion that such a creature, capable of acting both with and without reason, could never exist because of the horrible things of which it could be capable. Either a creature has the ability for reason and rationality, but not the intelligence to do harm, or the reverse, but not both. Instead, he prefers to view humans only as particularly vicious “Gnnayhs.”

To decrease their numbers, the Houyhnhnms decide to castrate the Yahoos, which could in theory be undertaken with little concern because they are considered more livestock than equal beings. The brutality of this decision is striking because it is in fact a form of genocide, but it is accomplished through a means that no modern day veterinarian would have a problem with. In fact, the Houyhnhnms get the idea from Gulliver:
I mentioned a custom we had of castrating Houyhnhnms when they were young, in order to render them tame; that the operation was easy and safe; that it was no shame to learn wisdom from brutes, as industry is taught by the ant, and building by the swallow (for so I translate the word lyannah, although it be a much larger fowl); that this invention might be practised upon the younger Yahoos here, which besides rendering them tractable and fitter for use, would in an age put an end to the whole species, without destroying life. (Swift 486)

Gulliver’s Houyhnhnm master views this as a peaceful and merciful compromise, but to the reader, it appears monstrous. Gulliver proves his complete ethnocentric reorientation by having no response to this decision and instead launching into a discussion of other aspects of Houyhnhnm culture. The original suggestion is meant to apply only to young Yahoos, so it does not affect him personally right away. There is, however, a second part of this decision, made clear later by his master, that the other Houyhnhnms demand Gulliver be sent away as he “was not agreeable to reason or nature” (Swift 490). Gulliver has a visceral reaction to this, fainting before his master, but it is an undeniably kinder fate than what befalls the Yahoos.

Would he have advocated for castration as strongly if Gulliver would have been among the victims? And would the Houyhnhnms have come to that decision for the entire human race? There is something inherently unique about the Yahoos in that the Houyhnhnms see a general need to destroy them as a species. They do not feel this way about Gnayhs, for example, even though humans are equated with this bird race in intent and intelligence. The attack on the Yahoos, which is already brutal, appears particularly cruel because it is seemingly arbitrary. Despite their potential for horrific violence, the Houyhnhnms remain Gulliver’s ideal—even as he is forced to flee. Toward the end of his time in Houyhnhnmland, Gulliver reflects,

I must freely confess, that the many Virtues of those excellent Quadrupeds placed in opposite View to human Corruptions, had so far opened mine Eyes, and enlarged my Understanding, that I began to view the Actions and Passions of Man in a very different Light; and to think the Honour of my own Kind not worth managing; which, besides, it was impossible for me to do before a Person of so acute a Judgement as my Master, who daily convinced me of a thousand Faults in
my self, whereof I had not the least Perception before, and which with us would never be numbered even among the human Infirmities. (Swift 476-477)

This veneration for the Houyhnhnms comes shortly before his master rebukes Gulliver as a representative of his kind and prior to the danger of castration. Little changes even as Gulliver flees. He continues to desire the Houyhnhnms, but this earlier moment is also critical to understanding Gulliver’s frame of mind at the end of the travels because this is the moment when he first turns from humanity, and rejects the human race.

It is peculiar that Gulliver argues that the Houyhnhnms “had so far opened mine Eyes, and enlarged my Understanding” because they seem to have done the exact opposite. At every turn they have failed to provide Gulliver with anything but the bare minimum of what he required. They take many tries to find him a type of food that fits his requirements because they themselves only consume a few different types of food. They lack, as shown above, religious, governmental, and literary institutions. They pass their days debating philosophical ideas, but they write none of it down, leaving the next generation to inevitably replay the same debates. It is difficult to see, then, how these creatures could have opened up Gulliver’s mind to anything but a narrow and biased framing for life. Such a closed off existence seems to be antithetical to Gulliver’s earlier character, the curiosity of a traveler who at the beginning of Book III, notes “the Thirst I had of seeing the World, notwithstanding my past Misfortunes, continuing as violent as ever,” heading off to the East Indies, to Laputa, Luggnagg, and Japan (Swift 409).

His post Houyhnhnm perspective, in contrast, forces him to view the “Actions and Passions of Man in a very different Light; and to think the Honour of my own Kind not worth managing” (Swift 476). This is not the Gulliver of the first three voyages, who studied the different races he met with an inquisitive, yet distanced eye. Instead, he has become so enthralled with the Houyhnhnms who would do violence to him that he is ready to quit his old life forever.
Specifically, the "Actions and Passions" of man are now negative qualities. While it is easy to point to many actions that might cause any human to denounce others, such as violence, greed, or fraud, the inclusion of the word "Passions" in Gulliver's confession shows that the sailor has rejected far more than just the worst actions of humanity. He blames the human capacity of emotion itself for failing to live up to the isolationism practiced by the Houyhnhnms.

What he performs at the end of the satire when he returns to England, however, is very different from this apparent Houyhnhnm rationality. Gulliver actively hates other humans. His response is emotional and impulsive, but uses the rhetoric of "reason." He has emotionally rejected his passions, which is why he cannot see them as they overtake him. When he meets his wife for the first time on his return, for example, he describes a feeling of revulsion:

[My Wife took me in her Arms, and kissed me; at which, having not been used to the Touch of that odious Animal for so many Years, I fell in a Swoon for almost an Hour. At the Time I am writing, it is five Years since my last Return to England: During the first Year I could not endure my Wife or Children in my Presence, the very Smell of them was intolerable; much less could I suffer them to eat in the same Room (Swift 498).]

His initial reactions, even to his own wife, are instinctual. It is important to remember that he had been with the Houyhnhnms for years. He did not visit Houyhnhnmmland, he lived in it. But even after five years, he has not adapted. He still prefers the company of two horses he bought when he returned home. He even speaks to them, and even though they do not respond in the Houyhnhnm language, he claims they "understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four hours a day" (Swift 498).

These horses become as much a family for Gulliver as he ever had in his human relations before his voyage to the Houyhnhnmeland. Given that we know he is talking to an average horse, nowhere near the reported intelligence of his Houyhnhnm master, the reader might assume he has gone mad with grief, but this is not so. These horses have in common with their super
rational cousins many important aspects. They live simply, and have no need for material possessions or war. In addition, they lack the ability to lie and deceive. They may, in fact, be even better than the Houyhnhnms from Gulliver’s perspective. The Houyhnhnms were supposedly completely rational, they were brutal as well singling out the Yahoo for extinction.

They simply cannot imagine how violence might feel to the other. Gulliver may also suggest violence, but he can imagine its effects. He may become colonized by the Houyhnhnms, but he also remembers what it’s like to kiss. He is revolted by his wife and the thought of touching her, whereas a Houyhnhnm would simply be perplexed by the notion.

The Houyhnhnms have poisoned Gulliver’s mind by showing him a form of perfection devoid of any complicating factors. Gulliver returns to England, a place awash in such factors. From this perspective, the fourth voyage of *Gulliver’s Travels* mocks the horse-like utopians as much as it praises them. Swift sets up a dichotomy between hyper-rationality and an absence of rationality, and leaves the reader to understand that England is in fact neither since both perceptions are relative. While the Houyhnhnms claim to be free of violence and vice, it is unclear that this would remain true if they were to ever confront an entire human nation instead of a single representative. More importantly, what would happen to the Houyhnhnm that washed up on the shores of England? Would it remain the rational being it started as? Would it be colonized just as Gulliver was? Or would it learn the concept of merely capable—with the promise and pain that emotion, innovation, passion and empathy can offer.
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