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Reframing Rationality: The “Telescope” and the Question into the Night in Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*

Gong Mengqing, Li Wanghua

Abstract: In Bertolt Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*, the telescope serves as a potent metaphor for instrumental rationality—a logic of measurement and mastery of the cosmos. However, Brecht disrupts the triumphant narrative of scientific progress. The once-prophetic Galileo, physically blind at the end of the play, poses a paradoxical question: “How is the night?” This article argues that Galileo’s inquiry, who has lost his sight, constitutes a profound epistemological shift—a movement from the “radiant” evidence of the telescope to the “introspective” uncertainty of ethical responsibility. Drawing upon Max Weber and Horkheimer’s distinction between “instrumental rationality” and “value rationality”, this article focuses on the inherent contradictions within the play’s various structures and phenomena, represented by the telescope, and the “clear” night in blind eyes, and argues that Rationality, as an ambiguously defined by Galileo, is clarified and reconstituted through Galileo’s dynamic practice and reflection amidst the complex interplay between means and ends. Specifically, we contend that rationality is not a static quality inherent in Galileo, but rather an evolving performance that he continuously revises and ultimately confronts in its internal insufficiency. That is, rationality emerges not as pre-ordained dogma, but as a dynamic commitment to ethical ends.

Keywords: Bertolt Brecht; *Life of Galileo*; Instrumental rationality; Value rationality

Author Biography: Gong Mengqing, PhD candidate at Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Her research interests include scale studies and Ecocriticism. E-mail: mqelisa@163.com. Li Wanghua (corresponding author), Associate Professor at Guangzhou College of Commerce. His research interests include Techno-Humanities. E-mail: thunderlwh@163.com

题目：对理性的再思考：布莱希特《伽利略传》中的“望远镜”与黑夜之问

摘要：在布莱希特的《伽利略传》中，望远镜隐喻了工具理性，表现为一种测量与掌握宇宙的科学逻辑。然而，布莱希特改编了最初版本关于科学进步的胜利叙事。在剧本尾声，伽利略双目失明，却提出了一个矛盾的问题：夜色如何？论文认为，失明的伽利略所发出的这一追问，构成了一次关于“理性”的认识论转向：从望远镜展现测量的“明晰”，到伦理责任中内省式的“不确定”。借助马克斯·韦伯（Max Weber）与马克斯·霍克海默（Max Horkheimer）对“工具理性”和“价值理性”的区分，论文指出，伽利略在剧作中所反复诉诸的理性，在内涵上是模糊的。而其模糊性，正源于手段与目的之间的复杂纠葛；并在科学与社会实践的碰撞中，逐渐被反思，澄清与重构。理性并非伽利略所固有的静态品质，而是在其不断修正和反思目的与手段之间的偏移，并最终直面其内在不足的过程性实践。换言之，理性不是预设的教条，而是对伦理目的的动态承诺。

关键词：布莱希特；《伽利略传》；工具理性；价值理性

作者简介：龚梦情，博士研究生，广东外语外贸大学英语语言文化学院，研究方向：尺度研究，生态批评。电邮：mqelisa@163.com。李望华（通讯作者），副教授，广州商学院，研究方向：数字人文。电邮：thunderlwh@163.com

“In the year sixteen hundred and nine, Science’s light began to shine”¹ (p. 5), this introductory verse in Bertolt Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* heralds a revolutionary dawn in which Galileo’s empirical verification challenges the shackles of religious dogma. However, by the play’s end, Galileo, now physically blind, poses a haunting question to his daughter: “How is the night?” (p. 110). This stark transition from the radiant expansion of the telescope to the introspective darkness of the final scene constitutes what John Willett describes as a “single jab” pinning the beginning and the end together² (p. xxi). In this “optimistic tragedy,” Willett captures this resolute, albeit paradoxical, optimism by asking: “Was there ever a time when Reason had such a chance?” (p. xxi). This dramatic collapse from the “light” of certainty into the “night” of ethical uncertainty, raises a fundamental question about the nature of rationality itself.

Scholarly interpretations of this crisis have traditionally diverged into two primary trajectories. One, represented by Fredric Jameson (1998) and Sun Bai (2014), situates Galileo within a historical-materialist framework. They view him as a “temporary vessel of history” (Sun, 2014, p. 112) whose actions reflect the inevitable emergence of the modern world. This perspective gains particular force when applied to Brecht’s postwar revisions, which systematically reorient Galileo’s actions within a nexus of material and historical pressures. However, while this historical lens effectively subsumes Galileo’s individual ethical agency under the mantle of historical necessity, it risks obscuring the polysemic nature of “Reason”. The second perspective, exemplified by Anthony Squiers (2014), concentrates on Galileo’s “betrayal of truth” in the

¹ Brecht, B. (1980). *Life of Galileo* (J. Willett, Trans.). In J. Willett & R. Manheim (Eds.), *Bertolt Brecht: Collected plays: Volume five (Part 1)* (pp. 1–105). Eyre Methuen. Subsequent citations cite page numbers only.

² Willett, J. (1980). Introduction. In J. Willett & R. Manheim (Eds.), *Bertolt Brecht: Collected plays: Volume five* (pp. vi–xxii). Eyre Methuen. Subsequent citations cite page numbers only.

American Version. He argues that Galileo's compromise with the rational forms of the ruling class, the Pope, the Inquisitors, and the bourgeois worldview, effectively "allowed the eventual victory of instrumental reason" (Squiers, 2014, p. 128). The radiant light of reason is thus eclipsed by what Brecht calls the "original sin of modern science" (p. 126). Schumacher (1968) further notes that this dialectical opposition in aesthetic form is designed to force the audience to dispassionately observe the alienation of reason. However, this article contends that the essence of Reason is not merely a binary struggle between bourgeois ideology and scientific truth. As Galileo asserts in the initial version, "Reason is not coming to an end, but beginning" (as cited in Willett, 1990, p. xxii). By focusing on the American Version, which "omits the reference to Reason" (Willett, 1990, p. xxii), Brecht arguably reconfigures Reason. It is no longer treated as a static, triumphalist noun, but is instead reconstituted through the dynamic conflict between science-as-instrument and universal human values.

1. Clarification of "Reason" and the Conflicting Modes of "Rationality"

The analysis of Brecht's *Life of Galileo* reveals the necessity of rethinking our conception of "Reason" in intellectual history. Traditionally viewed as a static, monolithic concept, Reason should instead be understood as a dynamic arena of conflict between scientific tools and universal human values. The term "Reason" appears frequently in the play, yet its precise meaning remains intentionally ambiguous. To address this, the article suggests applying Max Weber's sociological typology of Rationality (*Rationalität*) as a diagnostic tool, complemented by Horkheimer's critique of instrumental reason. By examining Galileo's commitment to Reason through the lens of instrumental versus value rationality, we can better understand the underlying structural and ethical crises that shape the play's depiction of Reason, highlighting its complex role within societal and philosophical conflicts.

"Reason" is often invoked by Galileo as an objective, almost messianic force. It appears alternately as a synonym for evidence—the "seeing" proof afforded by the telescope, and as a universal logic that he believes will inevitably liberate the masses from the "pearly haze of superstition" (p.108). However, Galileo's practice of "Reason" in the text is fraught with ambiguity. It oscillates between representing a technical method of calculation and a moral imperative for scientific enlightenment. This fluidity is precisely what allows Galileo to initially believe that scientific truth is self-justifying: "How can anyone imagine that the sum of the angles in a triangle conflict with their needs? (p.68). The critique underscores a key issue: the term "Reason" is broad and historically loaded, risking obscuring the specific mechanisms by which scientific progress becomes decoupled from human welfare.

To address this ambiguity, Max Weber's categorizations of rationality provide a workable analytical lens. Weber³ distinguishes between purposive rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) and value rationality (*Wertrationalität*). The former concerns external expectations as a condition or means for one's rational purpose. The latter involves a conscious commitment to the intrinsic ethical or social worth of an action,

³ See Weber (2019), where he categorizes four types of social action: (1) purposive rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), (2) value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), (3) affectual action, and (4) traditional action.

independent of utilitarian outcomes. In the context of Galileo's scientific endeavors, his early scientific practice is the epitome of purposive rationality; he focuses on the "how" of the physical world, treating the telescope as a superior means to the end of astronomical accuracy. However, his later reckoning with his recantation exposes the insufficiency of this framework, forcing a turn toward value-rational questions that his instrumental successes cannot answer. To grasp this contested nature of Galileo's science, we must turn to the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental reason. Contemporaries of Brecht, thinkers like Horkheimer⁴, traces the evolution of rationality into the instrumentalization of reason. While Weber's purposive rationality offers a neutral typology of social action, Horkheimer (2004) exposes its historical "subjectivization" and subsequent "formalization" into a logic of mere calculation. Although Horkheimer primarily employs the term "subjective reason" to describe this narrowing of intellect to a means-end apparatus, his analysis provides the foundational critique of what is now recognized as "instrumental rationality". In this critical tradition, reason ceases to be a force for human liberation and becomes a mere "instrument" for coordinating means toward unquestioned ends (p. 5-6).

The necessity of this distinction lies in its ability to explain Galileo's eventual ethical collapse. By moving from the neutral "purposive" to the critical "instrumental", we argue that Galileo's tragedy is not just a personal failure of courage, but a systemic failure of a specific mode of rationality. His "Reason" survives as a technical triumph but is compromised as a liberatory human endeavor. It also aligns with Brecht's "alienation effect", which stages for the audience to witness the violent friction between instrumental means and value ends. By clarifying these concepts, we establish the foundation for examining how the "telescope" and the "night" form a dialectic that Galileo only begins to reconcile in his final reflections, ultimately concluding that the sole purpose of science is to "lighten the burden of human experience (p.108).

2. The Telescope: A Paradoxical Vessel between Enlightenment Values and Instrumental Means

In *Life of Galileo*, the telescope serves not merely as a scientific apparatus but also as a dramatic mediator of knowledge, power, and historical transformation. As an optical instrument that extends human vision, its significance in Brecht's play far exceeds its technical purpose. The telescope embodies a mode of rationality oriented toward efficiency, calculation, and control, represented as "instrumental rationality". Through Galileo's interaction with the telescope, Brecht stages a critical historical moment in which reason detaches itself from metaphysical or ethical frameworks and increasingly aligns with practical application. This shift not only destabilizes the medieval geocentric cosmology but also integrates scientific knowledge into emerging political, economic, and colonial power structures. By foregrounding the telescope as a theatrical object, Brecht renders visible how rationality is "translated" into practice and how its social consequences

⁴ According to Horkheimer (2004), an individual's "subjective reason proves to be the ability to calculate probabilities and thereby to coordinate the right means with a given end" (p. 5). This definition itself exposes the inherently instrumental nature of such rationality: it consciously abdicates the evaluation of the ends themselves, as well as "the task of passing judgment on man's actions and way of life", instead surrendering them to the "ultimate sanction" of conflicting social interests (p. 6).

unfold through a sequence of conflicts, negotiations, and strategic compromises. This section traces how Galileo's "purposive rationality" gradually hardens into "instrumental rationality", exposes its epistemological fragility, and reveals the illusion that scientific truth guarantees social good—a crisis anchored in both the macro-level of historical power structures and the micro-level of Galileo's own psychological makeup.

Importantly, however, the telescope does not suddenly emerge as a symbol of instrumental rationality at a single dramatic turning point. Instead, Brecht carefully distributes its significance throughout the early structure of the play, allowing the logic of utility, exchange, and cooperation to take shape gradually. From Galileo's initial confrontation with institutional demands for usefulness in the first scene, to the strategic presentation of the telescope to political authorities in the second, and to his explicit affirmation of faith in human reason in the third, the telescope is embedded within a historical trajectory that reveals the conditions under which scientific reason seeks legitimacy. Seen from this structural perspective, the telescope is not merely a metaphor for instrumental rationality; it is the medium through which Galileo's purposive commitment to the dissemination of scientific truth increasingly relies on instrumentally rational means, thereby exposing science to appropriation by power.

In the first two scenes, Galileo's exchange with the Procurator poses a fundamental question: Does knowledge possess intrinsic value, or is its worth measured solely by its utility? This scene culminates in an instrumental assessment of the telescope's practical value: "That'll get us 500 scudi (p. 19). At this early stage, such instrumental evaluation appears more as an external condition than a personal ethical choice. In other words, scientific reason, embodied as objective rationality, operates from the beginning within a social milieu governed by utility, exchange, and economic constraints. A shift in Galileo's relationship to this logic occurs only after the telescope formally enters the realm of political authority, explicitly promoted for its practical applications in navigation, trade, and warfare. Galileo's response— "I'm not sure how long I'll be able to stick this circus" (p. 20), reveals his profound awareness of the economic and military benefits the telescope generates. He understands that those in power view the telescope as a lucrative device rather than a revolutionary epistemological tool. This moment is crucial for understanding the emergence of instrumental rationality. Galileo's cooperation is neither naive nor purely self-interested; it is strategic. His objective remains the dissemination of scientific truth, yet the means he employs lean toward catering to the pragmatic logic of the authorities. This strategic calculation, while still purposive-rational in Weber's neutral sense, already contains the seed of what the Frankfurt School would diagnose as instrumental rationality. That is, his actions are purposive-rational rather than value-oriented: he chooses his means based on their effectiveness in achieving a desired goal. The ultimate ethical end (scientific enlightenment), remains intact, but the path toward it is increasingly paved by instrumental rationality.

Brecht examines this tension by juxtaposing Galileo's public performance with his private scientific practice. While political authorities recognize the telescope's economic and military potential, Galileo spends the night observing the moon, uncovering evidence that challenges the Aristotelian, geocentric model of the cosmos. This contrast is both thematic and structural, highlighting a fundamental rupture between the

social trajectory of science and its epistemological substance. The telescope functions on two levels: as a tool for uncovering truth in the scientist's hands, yet as a means to advance navigation and commerce, fueling colonial expansion in the eyes of power. Brecht intentionally leaves this contradiction unresolved, implying that the same rational apparatus can serve incompatible ends—depending entirely on the social relations that govern its use.

Galileo's reliance on empirical proof as a persuasive tool deepens this contradiction. Confronted with Florentine philosophers and theologians, Galileo insists that the controversy can be resolved by a simple act: "I'll take them by the scruff of the neck, and I'll drag them to the telescope. ...they are subject to the seduction of proof (p. 32). This perspective reduces rational inquiry to an operational gesture, where visibility becomes a sufficient condition for acceptance. However, the refusal of his opponents to observe does not merely indicate ignorance or dogmatism; it exposes the vulnerability of rationality when viewed solely as an instrumental process. When proof is detached from shared epistemic authority, its persuasive power diminishes significantly. Significantly, this failure does not prompt Galileo to reconsider the limits of his means. Instead, it reinforces his conviction that resistance to reason must be overcome not through dialogue, but through institutional escalation. The scene thus marks a crucial moment in which instrumental rationality, having failed epistemologically, seeks validation at a higher level of authority rather than reflecting on its own conditions of possibility.

The opening stage direction of the third scene makes this escalation explicit. Brecht informs the audience that Galileo's friends warn him of the "possible consequences" his research may bring, yet Galileo remains committed to the belief in "human reason" (p.22). This conviction now resembles an ethical wager: that truth, once revealed, will ultimately overcome institutional opposition and misuse. Galileo's earlier cooperation is seen as part of a broader strategy, assuming rational proof that is initially used instrumentally, will eventually surpass its original purpose and stand on its own merits. The telescope symbolizes this shift, embodying instrumental rationality. It no longer merely serves an ethical role but actively transforms the conditions of reasoning. By emphasizing visibility, demonstration, and effectiveness, Galileo elevates rationality into a force that demands acceptance, rather than encouraging shared understanding. This perspective underscores the transformative power of scientific instruments and rational proof in shaping societal and intellectual progress, illustrating how technological advancements can redefine the very nature of reason and its societal impact.

This transformation of reason into a force that demands acceptance finds its clearest dramatization in the sixth scene at the Vatican research institute. There, the argument that Galileo's public acknowledgment signifies an epistemological triumph warrants further scrutiny. When Clavius publicly acknowledges the correctness of Galileo's observations, Galileo's response— "Not me: reason has won (p. 54), is often read as a moment of epistemological triumph. Yet this statement functions less as a celebration of scientific progress and more as a strategic positioning within institutional power structures. It shifts the locus of victory from individual discovery to the authority of reason itself, conflating methodological validation with a broader societal acceptance of rationality as an inevitable principle. This conflation can be more precisely

diagnosed as the characteristic illusion of instrumental rationality: the belief that the effectiveness of means guarantees the achievement of ethical ends. Brecht emphasizes that reason, as affirmed in this context, is easily neutralized or co-opted within existing power structures. The acknowledgment of reason's correctness is thus a strategic move to contain its implications, not an unambiguous endorsement of its liberatory potential.

From a broader historical perspective, the integration of the telescope into navigation and warfare situates Galileo's predicament within the expansion of early modern power structures. Historically, the telescope was not merely an instrument of astronomical discovery but also a critical technology for maritime navigation and military surveillance. By 11 August 1609, Galileo presented the telescope to the Venetian Senate, assuring them of its strategic value against naval invasions—a move that underscores how scientific innovation was deeply embedded in the logic of state competition (Brake, 2009, p.121). Brecht's dramatization captures this duality by illustrating how scientific instruments serve broader political and military interests: the telescope is not merely a neutral tool of knowledge but becomes part of an emerging infrastructure of domination. It enables not only the observation of distant stars but also the control of remote territories, collapsing the distance between cosmological inquiry and colonial expansion.

Galileo's own strategic decisions, however, further complicate this picture. His faith in empirical evidence leads him to believe that reason possesses an inherent liberatory potency, capable of overcoming resistance through sheer demonstrative force. However, this conviction inherently blurs the boundary between subjective rationality and objective ethical ends. Lin Xi (2015) observes that Galileo's rationality is intertwined with sensual pleasure, manifesting as an instinctive reaction akin to "the itching of a scab" (p. 26). Driven by instinct and personal gratification rather than a clear moral purpose, Galileo's scientific pursuit lacks the social responsibility necessary for ethical practice. Consequently, his recantation before the Inquisition can be viewed as the inevitable collapse of this epistemological myth that verifiability equates to inevitable cognitive transformation, a belief that underpins the optimistic view of instrumental reason. This myth neglects the social and political contingencies that influence scientific acceptance and application.

By foregrounding the telescope as a theatrical object, Brecht renders the social life of reason visible. The instrument acts as a shifting witness to Galileo's practice: it transitions from a conduit for astronomical enlightenment to an instrumental commodity shaped by bourgeois interests. Here, the telescope mediates not only between the observer and the stars, but more critically, between knowledge and power, enlightenment and domination. While the telescope demonstrates the methodological efficacy of instrumental reason, it simultaneously exposes its ethical vulnerability. When rationality is detached from moral values, it confronts limitations in the face of irrational power structures and un-awakened publics. This predicament stems not only from the external oppression of the ruling class but also from the rupture between instrumental rationality and social reality: the fact that the "truth" of scientific discovery cannot automatically translate into the "good" of social operation.

3. “What’s the night like?”: Rationality as a Dynamic Process of Reflection and Commitment

The later scenes compel a reconsideration of rationality beyond its instrumental efficacy that the telescope represents. Brecht stages a series of ethical confrontations that reveal the insufficiency of instrumental reason when detached from value orientation. Through two pivotal conversations, first with the Little Monk and later with Andrea, Brecht presents a painful and unresolved transition toward what may be called “value rationality”: a form of rational commitment grounded not in effectiveness alone, but in responsibility, ethical judgment, and the meaning of human flourishing. This transition is neither linear nor triumphant. Rather, it unfolds as a dialectical process marked by misunderstanding, regret, and belated reflection, culminating in the haunting image of Galileo’s blindness and the question of the “night”. This section traces this dialectical process in three moments: first, the Little Monk’s challenge to Galileo’s technical optimism; second, Galileo’s strategic use of the vernacular as an extension rather than the resolution of instrumental logic; and finally, the confession to Andrea—all culminating in the “night” as an unresolved question that redefines rationality as a reflexive practice of ethical vigilance.

The dialogue with the Little Monk marks the first sustained challenge to Galileo’s early confidence in the liberating power of knowledge. The Monk’s decision to abandon astronomy stems not from intellectual deficiency or theological dogmatism, but from ethical concerns rooted in lived experience. His account of his parents, peasants in the Campagna, articulates an attachment to meaning embedded in a pre-modern cosmological order. As he explains, his parents “are badly off, but even their misfortunes imply a certain order” (p. 65). This “order” does not function as a logical explanation of the world, but as a value-laden framework that renders suffering intelligible and endurable. What the Monk fears, therefore, is not simply an astronomical error in the heliocentric model, but the possibility that the process of disenchantment will unsettle the fragile moral economy through which hardship has long been borne. In his view, the Christian universe, however illusory, provides existential stability and hope for those whose lives are shaped by exhaustion, poverty, and historical inertia. To dismantle that universe without offering an alternative ethical horizon appears, from his perspective, not as enlightenment but as a form of cruelty.

Galileo’s response, by contrast, reveals a confidence in purposive rationality. He counters the Monk’s concerns with a sharply utilitarian logic: “the virtues of exhaustion derive from exhausted fields, and I reject them. Sir, my new pumps will perform more miracles in that direction than all your ridiculous superhuman slaving” (p. 67). Galileo seeks to replace teleological interpretations of suffering with causal explanations, recasting poverty as a technical problem of inefficiency. As Cohen (1970) argues, Galileo tends to identify the cause of science with that of social revolution, a move that underwrites his exposure of the Church’s cosmological order as an ideological mechanism that rationalizes the misery of the peasants (p. 86). From this perspective, religious consolation appears as a mystification that sustains passivity, preserving what Galileo elsewhere calls the “order of an empty cupboard”, so that “the throne of Saint Peter can stand at the hub of the earth” (p. 43). Yet the exchange also suggests a tension that Galileo’s technical optimism cannot fully resolve: while new knowledge may promise material improvement, it offers no immediate answer to the ethical disorientation produced when inherited structures of meaning collapse.

A deeper tension emerges in his response: “How can anyone imagine that the sum of the angles in a triangle conflict with their needs? But unless they get moving and learn how to think, they will find even the finest irrigation systems won’t help them” (p. 68). While Galileo acknowledges that technical tools such as irrigation are insufficient without a cognitive shift, his reasoning registers little awareness of the complexity of scientific discovery as a social life of reason. He operates on the assumption that once a truth is “forced through” (p. 68), the broader social and ethical victory of reason will follow as a matter of historical course. This is the same illusion diagnosed earlier: the belief that methodological efficacy guarantees ethical ends, now transposed from the institutional register to the epistemological one. Within this exchange, the Little Monk voices a plea for value-orientation, a reminder that if reason is to serve humanity, it must remain attentive to hope, meaning, and the fragile equilibrium of social life. Brecht neither endorses the Monk’s withdrawal from science nor dismisses the ethical weight of his hesitation: the dialogue leaves unresolved a tension that instrumental reason alone cannot settle. Galileo then attempts to overcome institutional resistance through technical and strategic adjustments, most notably by shifting from academic Latin to the Italian vernacular. While this move undoubtedly disrupted the clerical monopoly on knowledge and brought astronomical debate into the streets, Galileo nonetheless insists: “I’ve written a book about the mechanics of the universe, that’s all. What people make of it or don’t make of it isn’t my business (p. 88). This gesture functions as a strategic extension of instrumental rationality. The vernacular operates here not as an effort to cultivate shared ethical understanding, but primarily as a tactical instrument, a political lever deployed against the Church’s monopoly. In doing so, Galileo places excessive confidence in a communicative fallacy: that by merely altering the medium of transmission, demonstrative truth can compel existing power structures to yield, bypassing the need for a broader ethical consensus.

Consequently, Galileo’s confession to Andrea in captivity constitutes a radical negation of his earlier strategic rationality: The battle for a measurable heaven has been won thanks to doubt; but thanks to credulity the Rome housewife’s battle for milk will be lost time and time again. ... To what end are you working? Presumably for the principle that science’s sole aim must be to lighten the burden of human existence. If the scientists, brought to heel by self-interested rulers, limit themselves to piling up knowledge for knowledge’s sake, then science can be crippled and your new machines will lead to nothing but new impositions (p.108).

His rejection of Andrea’s heroic reinterpretation that he recanted to “hide the truth” for posterity, is a profound repudiation of the logic that scientific survival justifies ethical compromise. Galileo now perceives that survival at the cost of moral surrender provides a template for the ultimate instrumentalization of science. In this pivotal monologue, Brecht articulates what could be understood, in Weberian terms, as the play’s most explicit demand for a “value-rational” foundation for science—that its sole legitimate goal is “to lighten the burden of human existence” (p. 108). Knowledge detached from such ethical commitment is inherently vulnerable to co-option by power, transforming technical progress into a mechanism of “new impositions” rather than liberation. His vision of a “Hippocratic Oath” for scientists retrospectively exposes the catastrophic vacuum left by his earlier instrumentalism. Without such constraints, science risks

producing what Galileo bitterly calls “a race of inventive dwarfs” (p. 109), technicians who possess the means to observe the stars but lack the ethical ends to protect humanity. This confession, however, does not function as a moral resolution. Instead, it presents a paradox: the most lucid articulation of scientific ethics comes from the very figure who failed to embody them. Value rationality, in this reading, emerges not as a static achievement, but as a traumatic realization born of failure.

Ultimately, *Life of Galileo* dramatizes a historical conflict between reason and authority through the staging a critical confrontation within the structure of rationality itself. The tension between instrumental rationality, focused on the “how” of cosmic mechanics, and value rationality, concerned with the “why” of human suffering, remains deliberately unresolved. Brecht resists the temptation of a neat resolution, opting instead to leave the audience in a state of productive alienation. This alienation is not an invitation to passive observation, but a demand for the constant recalibration of reason’s social purpose. Herein, rationality is redefined as a reflexive practice, one that must continually confront its own alienating potential. The question and answer between Galileo and his daughter Virginia— “What’s the night like? /Clear” (p. 110), offers no final enlightenment that rationalism promises; rather, it reveals that the victory of reason is not found in the authoritative acceptance of “telescope”, but in the unceasing struggle to ensure that the tools of progress do not become the shackles of the spirit. The play thus establishes that the true “life” of Galileo, and of reason itself, resides in this unresolved, vigilant accountability to the human condition.

4. Conclusion

Bertolt Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* initially appears to invite a familiar Enlightenment narrative, dramatizing the struggle between a heroic pursuit of truth and the authority of an obscurantist institution. As this article has argued, however, Brecht persistently resists affirming reason as an unequivocal moral good or a stable historical ideal. Instead, he presents reason as a conflicted social practice, one that is historically situated, institutionally mediated, and ethically fraught.

This article has shown that Galileo’s life functions not merely as a microcosm of scientific history, but as a dramatic exploration of the internal tensions of modern rationality itself. Rather than positioning reason solely against external adversaries, Brecht exposes fractures within reason: between instrumental efficacy and social responsibility, between empirical knowledge and ethical universality, and between the logic of means and the pursuit of ends. Drawing on Max Weber and Max Horkheimer’s critiques of instrumental and value rationality, this article has treated reason as a process enacted through language, institutional negotiation, technical mediation, and ethical choices. In this sense, Brecht does not simply thematize reason; he stages it as a sequence of concrete decisions embedded in specific historical and institutional contexts. From this perspective, Galileo’s actions—his strategic use of the telescope, his negotiations with political authorities, his faith in the visibility of evidence, and his eventual remorse, cannot be understood as isolated moral failings or personal shortcomings. Rather, they illuminate how instrumental rationality operates in social practice: how it seeks recognition, engages power, and repeatedly misjudges its ethical limits.

Reason, is something Galileo continually performs, revises, and ultimately confronts in its insufficiency.

His painful movement from instrumental success toward ethical self-reflection underscores that rationality is neither an inherited legacy nor a guaranteed path to progress. It remains a fragile, contested, and reflexive practice, constantly tested by historical change and human suffering. What Brecht ultimately offers is not a teleological resolution of truth, but a demand for vigilance: a commitment to reason that remains critically attentive to its own social consequences.

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ORCID

Gong Mengqing ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2037-7300>

Li Wanghua ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4437-6462>

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