

### III-20. Man is Capable of Being Rational

We are old-fashioned monkeys and futuristic apes. We are sympathetic, canny, crude, and dazzling. We are profoundly aggressive, and we have many loci of control over that aggression. We feel our way to the narthex of love and think our way down its nave. We are like nothing else that has even appeared on this threshing blue planet, and we will become, in the next few centuries, like nothing we can fathom now. And we will do it wearing our same old Stone Age genes.

- Natalie Angier in *Woman*

In an appeal to human consciousness and conscience in shaping rational perceptions Boris Pasternak's Dr Zivago observed: *It is the property of our brain that it makes us aware of ourselves and of the world around us. It is a beam of light directed outwards.* Such rationality is a feedback to improve human condition. Whatever else it entails, humans are curious and inquisitive. It makes them want to control their course by directing their behavior. Whether or not the *light directed outwards* alone is sufficient, the metaphor does appeal to individual decision-making. Is attitude of reason is justified? True? Valid?

Consequence evaluation is sufficiently complex. It cannot be left at the discretion of ad hoc and untested assumptions. Also one cannot bask in the conviction of Cartesian arrogance that an intelligent human being could reason his way through any problem. Argumentation cannot suffice for judging validity and veridicality. Subtleties of nature often supercede subtleties of arguments designed to capture the reality.

**What did we learn from animals?**

Tools mimic many of the natural devices. We also learn from other behaviors. All animals do everything necessary to survive and thrive. They seek pleasure (gratification) at significant expenditure of their energy and resources. Most animals posture with aggression but rarely have violent fights. Controlled experiments also show that Rhesus monkeys know pain of others of their own kind, and stop hurting them after they recognize it to be so (empathy).

**Playfulness as rationality.** Appeal to rationality is a component of self-image. It can be a tool for exploitation if corrupted with ad hoc beliefs. Rationalizations are also invented to justify actions and goals where nefarious motives lie just below the surface. It is not clear if there is evolutionary pressures to curtail the damage wrought by brands of fleeting rational approaches that come and go. When the safety-valve does not work, most societies demand a change.

Rationality is an attitude of open search. If the goal is to realize the unrealized potential it lies at the fringes or remain submerged in perceptions. Irrespective of usage, the domain of rationality is narrow and that of irrationality is boundless with little overlap. The value of rational decision making may be in choosing the world of facts to construct usable postulates. In decision-making, past correlations and trends are often used to predict future events. It accentuates the risk in beliefs.

An umbrella of rationality covers individual pragmatic values. Criteria include utility, expectation, satisfiability, effectiveness, optimization. Such rationality in behavior applies to all the choices and actions guided by rational thinking. It may

include beliefs which may not yet be formulated, may not have a clear meaning, logical consistency, and empirical verification. Such ethos is not meaningfully articulated. Yet it has autonomous value for which the criteria are rooted in the reliability perceptions rooted in shared knowledge.

Rationality has been treated as the spirit underlying the utility of tools for goal attainment. As a metaphor it may strike some as vulgar. On the other hand, products of rational searches have emerged as tools that continue to contribute more than any idealization of pure rational thought.

The survivors of the change may even argue that the change is for the better. Unfortunately, nothing excludes the use of rational strategies for mass murder and wars. Rationally selected methods can destroy rational thoughts on a massive scale. On more than one occasion, slogans of rational realism have been used to camouflage the status quo and conservative tendencies. Relativistic or nihilist traps (cynicism) offer little consolation against such psycho-sociological fog.

**Contradiction is experienced as a violation of rationality.**

Rational restraint is a form of triumph over one's self. It requires certain traits of character to deal with contradictions: courage against orthodoxy, responsibility to look straight in the face of the facts, and exercising moderation in the expression of judgment. Often rationality is excluded from emotion, feeling and desires. It does not have to be the case unless reality is deformed into delusion. Recall that Dionysian elements motivate human *actions*. As Zorba the Greek said to his friend, *You lack a bit of madness*. After all, in creative work success is attained through playful obsession that often ignores the rules of the game. This is not to be confused with the reptilian instinct of winning at any cost.

**Are there rationally drawn boundaries of rationality?** According to the laws of thermodynamics, *thing cannot be created out of nothing, or events can not happen unless mediated by real entities.* In the same spirit there are two other types of reality-based impossibility theorems. They demonstrate that our naive intuitions about rationality cannot be counted upon to yield coherent and consistent theory:

(a) Godel's incompleteness theorem and the paradoxes of set theory relate to the foundations of mathematics and the limits of analytical approaches.

(b) Milnor and Arrow's impossibility theorem is relevant to the foundations of the concept of rationality and justice.

Together these laws provide a deterministic insight: Irrespective of the domain, all actions have associated costs to be paid either up front or in the consequences.

# Against Gods and Humbug

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