Beyond Rationality

Beyond Rationality: Contemporary Issues

Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

ROM HARRÉ

Recently, and perhaps more stridently than for many years, accusations of "irrationality" have been bandied about directed at people and their views and also to their modes of reasoning or lack of them. When the recent banking crisis loomed many people accused the bankers of folly. How could they be so stupid as to believe that property prices will always rise? Those who denied the reality of climate change were anathematized in more or less the same terms as those who believed that they had been kidnapped by aliens. Surely, there must be something different in the mental make-up of people who are willing and even eager to blow themselves to pieces in acts of religious protest and revenge.

At the same time, commentators were also ready to declare, "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter." Or to put the matter in more psychological terms, what strikes us as irrational in someone else's thinking and acting is not seen in that light by the person so derided. Is there some universal standard for what is to count as rational thought, rational action and rational decisions? If there is, we have not yet hit upon it. This situation is hardly new, but discussions of "irrationality" by philosophers and psychologists have shed little light on these puzzles as they emerge when we try to understand contemporary discourses around this issue.

The Centre for the Philosophy of Natural and Social Science at the London School of Economics seemed the ideal place from which to launch a new attack on the problems of the meanings of irrationality claims. To that end, a program of international workshop style conferences was inaugurated with a meeting on November 20, 2009. A list of the papers presented at that meeting can be found in an appendix to this volume. The meeting confirmed our impression that there was a wide and deep domain of problems in all sorts of guises and in all sorts of disciplines to be tackled both in the search for the Eldorado of a universal standard of rational thought and action and in the ways in which the irreconcilable claims of those who accuse and those who defend the rationality of many important programs and policies.

In this volume we have collected the work presented at the Second Beyond Rationality workshop session which took place over two days at the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, Mississippi. The range of topics was wide, but the coherence of themes and treatment suggested that they would make a timely volume.

We have grouped the contributions into three parts. Part One, titled "Characterizing Irrationality," deals with the analysis of accusations of cognitive irrationality, such as choosing short term goods over long term advantage, as well as the possible origins of the tendency to make irrational judgments. Part Two ("Collective Irrationality") covers irrationality and rationality on a public scale, for example the apparent irrationality of willingly putting oneself under totalitarian rule. Part Three ("Global and Corporate Irrationality and the Future") deals with mass irrationality and rationality on a larger scale, for example in the promotion and execution of genocide.

Part One

We begin our study program in Chapter One with a survey of folly – doing and thinking things that we are capable of realizing are stupid and contrary to our own best interests, but which we do nevertheless. This is where it all started with Aristotle's diagnosis of akrasia – the tendency to do what is worse though one knows what is best. We might say that folly is the everyday form that personal irrationality is likely to take. However, stupidity is not the explanation for folly – since follies are committed by people of all levels of intelligence and intellectual maturity.

Max Steuer raises the question of how there came to be irrationality in human life at all. Chapter Two links the emergence of cognitive irrationality with the conditions for the evolution of the thoughtful management of life. Taking irrationality to be a feature of thought, he identified it with the tendency to persist in a belief when one has been given compelling arguments against it. But why does this tendency exist in such highly evolved beings as ourselves? The answer lies in the role of emotions in thinking. The answer is surprising - natural selection has not led to less irrational and emotion driven thinking because there is no advantage in "inclusive fitness" for people intolerant of irrationality. Emotion does not cloud judgment, it drives it. Emotions are critical features of how "the brain works," as Steuer puts it, and emotional forces lead to one persisting in a belief when it has been shown to be mistaken.

In Chapter Three, Robert Schmidle connects the problems of characterizing "rationality" and "irrationality" with Wittgenstein's notion of a "hinge." There are hinge practices, unexamined ways of acting that are the foundational activities of a form of life, and there are "hinge propositions" which express the content of hinge practices in such a way that their empirical character is manifest. Schmidle argues that the rationalities of forms of life are realized in their hinge practices. From this perspective there are no universal rational practices, but multitudes of possible forms of life, each of which has its own standards and paradigms of rationality. Furthermore, how we acquire the hinge practices that constitute the rational basis of our own practices is not through some superior personal logical insight but through the kind of apprenticeship to life that is described by Vygotsky in his conception of the social origins of "hinges," to use Wittgenstein's terminology. If we can understand the hinge propositions of another culture or form of life, then their attachment to certain hinge practices becomes intelligible.

Part Two

Conspiracy theories are apparently tremendously attractive to many people. Lee Basham examines the notion of a "conspiracy theory" in Chapter Four from several different viewpoints, settling on the definition that such a theory involves causal explanations, and the appeal to intentional deception by some people. There is ample room for conspiracy theories even in democratic "open" societies since they, too, are hierarchical and to some extent secretive. How can a conspiracy theory be revealed as such? There are real conspiracies, some benign, some malign. Some conspiracy theories do hit the mark. The Nazi government was killing millions of Jews, Gypsies and other people. But how can we separate this kind of case from mischievous accusations or fantasies? George W. Bush did not plan the attack on the World Trade Center to justify attacking Iraq in search of oil. However, established governments do hide some of their projects from their citizens, even if these projects are benign. Basham notes that the present prior probability of the existence of a conspiracy in a given society influences the form that the conspiracy theory takes. If it seems likely that the authorities are managing a cover up, a fairly simple and psychologically modest theory will do. But if it seems unlikely that such a cover up is going on, then the items that make up the conspiracy theory are likely to be extravagant and even bizarre. Conspiracy theorists respect the scientific method to some extent. The move toward the creation of support for a conspiracy theory depends very heavily on the revelation

of "errant data." Just as in physics, these are presumed facts that are inconsistent with the official story. Basham sums up his examination of the nature, plausibility and epistemology of conspiracy theories remarking that our best response to them is "studied agnosticism."

In Chapter Five, Fathali Moghaddam focuses on the complex pattern of conditions that make the emergence of dictatorial forms of government possible and even likely. Such forms of government are defined negatively by the degree to which the authorities act without the consent of the people. Moghaddam aligns "rationality" and "irrationality" with the distinction between conscious and unconscious sources of action. If certain conditions are present in a society and there are both people ready to support a dictator and a suitable candidate for power, then the slide to authoritarian rule begins. The unexamined social conditions of which people are unaware and thus serviceable as the roots of irrationality include economic insecurity, political instability, threats to collective identify, a sense of the decline of the society and the hint of the possibility of its revival. None of these conditions are likely to be consciously identified or overtly influential in the actions of individuals as they applaud the assumption of power by the likes of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini or Joseph Stalin. This analysis of the status of enabling conditions links neatly with Schmidle's introduction in Chapter Three of Wittgenstein's conception of a "hinge." Moghaddam's submerged factors of which the political actors are scarcely aware are realized in certain hinge practices on which the possibility of a totalitarian revolution turns.

One of the contexts in which people declare themselves puzzled to understand "how could they do this" is the path by which adherents are drawn in groups that not only advocate violent attacks on other people and their institutions but carry out their threats. How does someone become converted to this stance to life? Conversion, apparently across the boundaries of reason, has always puzzled those whose hearts are not struck by the discourses of conversion. St. Paul's change of heart and mind on the road to Damascus remains mysterious to most of us. In Chapter Six, Carl Jensen examines an example of a discourse of conversion which was successful in bringing people into the fold, a particularly virulent white supremacist group, which evolved from an isolated end-times religious sect. Supplementing Positioning Theory with Rothbart and Bartlett`s "Axiology of Difference" and Gilmartin's "Lethal Triad" models, Jensen follows the emergence of three successive story-lines. These narratives draw on Biblical sources for the shaping of a journey, as the group moves from location to location. Each successive narrative is tied in with successive positions as rights and duties among the faithful change from

the duty to preach the word of God to the right to self-defence, and the correlative right to resist the attempts by a "Jewish conspiracy" to create a world government. Here a new story-line emerged with a reworking of Adam, Eve and the Serpent to ground their supremacist beliefs. Eventually, authorities broke up the group. Positioning Theory is effective in this analysis because it lays great emphasis on the way that story-lines are tied to rights and duties which can be followed as the story-lines changed.

Part Three

The assessment of risk is a case where irrationality among risk assessors in their ways of foreseeing failures and disasters is intimately integrated with the public domain. In an interesting new twist, David Apgar explores the self-inflicted economic injuries among those who neglect to experiment in their economic practices and resort to risk assessment to maximize their stock holdings, gaining little and perhaps losing much in the long term.

What would the rational strategy be to halt the relative decline of the industrial basis of the U.S. economy? Apgar argues that this large scale economic phenomenon has its roots in the failure of management to undertake deliberate experimentation as the foundation of market strategy. Contributing to this neglect is the impetus that compensating management with stocks gives to efforts to estimate and mitigate risk. All this adds up to a kind of irrational myopia as to the best strategies to remain competitive in the current world economic order. Chapter Seven explores this "paradox" in a detailed analysis of the unexamined assumptions and practices that lead to it.

In Chapter Eight, Dan Rothbart uses the discursive practices that were a dominant influence in initiating and promoting genocide in East Africa to show how this horrific example fits well under neither of our categories of rationality or irrationality. Perhaps it is a-rational. In the chapter, Rothbart explores what such a categorization might mean to our understanding of such large scale events. The Rwanda massacres and the ethnic cleansing in Darfur are examples of identity based conflict. The discursive practices that make these conflicts possible are celebrations of ethnic difference. Both conflicts are rooted in narratives. The story-lines that are related to the positioning practices of the conflicting groups involving an "axiology of difference" that runs "under the threshold of rationality." By setting out the structure of the dynamics of the discursive promotion of these conflicts, Rothbart shows how the distribution of rights

and duties among the people forms the root of ethnic differences. The moral orders in these ethnic conflicts are generated by certain story lines: mythic narratives, iconic images and categories of duality. In the long running conflict in Darfur between the Arab militias and the indigenous African population, icons of "African degeneracy" are used to justify confining the African population to the lowest level of society. This is how the situation stands.

The last chapter appropriately introduces another variant on the concept of irrationality. What should we say about the possible forms that irrationality may take in the human future? Joseph Schafer bases his reflections on the phenomena of "data." It washes over and around us in floods and swathes. Most notable is the fact that there are so many ways of generating and distributing data compared with only a couple of decades ago. And it's cheap! But is it rational to take it all as of equal value? Surely not - there are two processes that insert a measure of irrationality in the passage from source to ourselves as consuming subjects. One is filtering - only a small slice of the available data reaches us. Who does the filtering and why? Then there is interpretation. We do not know what to make of a mere swatch of data. We need someone to provide interpretations and that, too, is a door through which irrationality can pass. We favour one commentator over the other with nothing to go on since there is no long term test of interpretations. This is the future of irrationality - not being swayed by influences outside our control. Rather, it is naiveté and innocence in the midst of this flux. As Schafer says, "the real risk for advancing irrationality is when consumers do not know the data they access, filter and interpret [or have filtered and interpreted for them] is being shaped through some type of software or algorithm." Paradoxically, just as irrationality of this sort is likely to become more common, so the very forces which lead in this direction can be designed to preclude this trend.

Conclusion

Through our studies, we have gone from the follies of an individual to the vast domains of irrationality in the conflicts between populations and even between the present and future. We have seen that there is no universal form that rational ways of thinking and acting can take and so there is no end to the varieties that irrationalities can have. Emotion may be the persisting source of the ever changing but ever present gap between Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk. However, the link between story-lines, meanings and positions enables us to undertake deep analyses of the ways

people manage their lives, be it tragic, mundane or even comic. The chapters in this book have mostly maintained a grimly serious intent, but irrationality is at its most productive when it is the mainstay of the absurd.

PART ONE:

CHARACTERIZING IRRATIONALITY

CHAPTER ONE

A CATALOGUE OF FOLLIES

ROM HARRÉ

The domain where we will look for follies includes beliefs, plans, actions, theories, opinions, decisions and other cognitive and material practices. Emotions are also a domain where follies abound but I will not consider them in this chapter. Our emphasis will be on discursive practices in which beliefs and opinions are formulated and presented and actions planned and interpreted.

Furthermore, brain science is not just ancillary to this enterprise but actually irrelevant, since the cultural, epistemic and historical relativity of accusations of folly is one of the most striking characteristics of the overall domain of "irrationality." Neuroscience is at least presented as bringing to light findings that are features of every human being.

a. We know that the brain adapts to the tasks that a culture requires of it.
b. The brain does what it does, and whether that eventuates in something rational or irrational is a matter of the socio-cultural matrix in which the manifestation appears.

Preliminaries

Beyond rationality, there is not one uniform domain of simple acts of irrationality. In making judgments of rationality or irrationality, there is an obvious tie to the having or not having a reason for an action, thought or opinion. One fragment of our critical usage takes the vocabulary in this way: an action, opinion and so on is *rational* if a reason can be given for it – only if no reason is at hand is it said to be *irrational*.

However, the vernacular tends to take "irrational" in a broader sense. "Irrational" is a judgment appropriate for activities for which the available reasons or those offered in defence of an action or thought are bad or defective by some local standard. These reasons might be self-serving,

self-contradictory, boil down to cowardice and so on. For the generic category of acts for which we blame stupidity, special pleading, self-indulgence, bad reasoning and so on, I will use the word "folly." It is folly to lend money to people who cannot pay it back – and it is also folly to ascribe to a part of a system some attribute, the meaning of which is given only in the context of the whole system.

Beyond rationality is not a uniform domain of the same kinds of irrational thinking and acting. There are myriad dimensions of discursive practices amongst which are some which lead people to think or do what others regard as follies. We note the biblical injunction not to try to remove the mote from another person's eye without taking care of the beam in one's own. However, this will not discourage me from trying.

This discussion is about Potent Conversations rather than the actions they lead to or the opinions and beliefs they encourage or express. It is not about psychological traits such as stupidity or recklessness, but how these traits are realized in discursive practices. One of the follies we will encounter is to infer the existence of such psychological traits from the conversational practices of people. Of course, we tend to rate a Potent Conversation by the kind of act or opinion, belief and so on it is likely to lead to.

Our aim might be to use explorations of the domain of discursive practices that lie beyond rationality as the search for forms of cognitive propriety, and to help to identify cases in which standards of cognitive propriety have been violated. Clearly, cognitive practices that are, by some dominant culture's standards, "beyond rationality," can reveal their own indigenous forms of cognitive propriety. Nevertheless, the folly of bankers did lead to people losing their homes, and the folly of climate change deniers could lead to a scorched and barren earth if their views gain political dominance. The study of the retrospective assessments of practices in terms not of their intrinsic characteristics (the work of this study group) but in terms of their deleterious consequences (and that too might be relative) is a project worth pursuing.

The Project

The purpose of this program is to collect and examine bad reasons and bad reasoning as they are manifested discursively. Moreover, the program works within the presumption that failure to conform to the rules of logic is not enough to account for assessments people make of the performances of others as folly; for example, subprime lending, denying the reality of climate change, believing the Kennedys murdered Marylyn Monroe, and

so on, may, in the moment, so to say, conform to the principles of logic – but with woefully inadequate premises.

The program is also aimed at finding the extra-logical discursive frameworks, case by case, within which a folly can be seen to be in accord with what are taken to be *locally good* reasons and sound practice. From this starting point, an examination of the relevant counterfactuals branches out – what if they had taken a bit more trouble, looked a little further, taken historical antecedents into account and so on? For example, how should we judge Fleiss's cure for hysteria by an operation on the nose against Freud's method of extracting confessions of juvenile sexual improprieties of thought or deed? The irrationality of the former seems obvious, while to dig into the confusions of thought behind the "talking cure" is a much more tentative and difficult project. What if Fleiss had looked more carefully at the neuro-anatomy of the entorhinal cortex – what if Freud had been a bit more self-critical and sceptical?

The discursive frameworks which sustain follies include much that can be studied by the analytical methods. Wittgenstein (1969) introduced a third range of such methods around his concept of a "hinge." Work on this concept has led to a pairing of hinge practices, unexamined procedures of thought and action on which all sorts of discursive activities turn, and "hinge propositions" (doppelgangers of hinge practices) which, when examined, turn out to be factual but which have been treated as if they were necessary truths.

Extraction of hinges and conceptual matrices which support "irrational practices" will make possible deeper critical assessments in the light of a larger framework than that in which the actors themselves were contented with the cognitive propriety of what they had been doing, thinking and so on – remembering that we too are working within some cognitive frame or frames.

Science as an Exemplar of Good Practice

Suppose it had been suggested that the question addressed in this chapter – the cataloguing of follies – is very easily dealt with? Everything that does not conform to logic is a folly. We can test this idea by seeing whether scientific discourses and practices are rational under this criterion. Bertrand Russell is largely responsible for the doctrine that by revealing the logical form of propositions we can come to see their deep character, and thus be in a position to assess them critically. Unfortunately, turning to science, revealing the logical form of the relation between evidential propositions and law-like statements shows that logic does not permit an

inference from "this phenomenon is thus and so" to "all like phenomena are thus and so," a proposition which at any rate looks like a frame for a Law of Nature. Hempel's Paradox displays the gap very clearly between logic and practical intuition. "All ravens are black" [P] would be supported, in common sense epistemology, by finding a black raven. But the proposition has a contrapositive of the same truth value as the positive derived by logic alone – "all non-black things are non-ravens" [Q]. So a white shoe, which is neither a raven nor black, supports the contrapositive by the same commonsense rule. Since Q entails P, a white shoe should support "all ravens are black." Whatever rules of good practice operate in the assessment of the acceptability of putative laws by reference to evidence they do not square with the possibilities of the logical manipulation of the law-like proposition to yield consequences that are true if their source proposition is true.

Clavius' Paradox is another blow at a logicist treatment of the rationality of the sciences. A simple theory to explain an apparent general truth, expressed as "all S are P" might be "all M are P," and "all S are M" so "all S are P." This syllogism is valid whatever M might be. So we can construct a deductive theory for some alleged law-like proposition in indefinitely many ways, because there is no constraint on choice of M. Whatever we choose, the inference is valid. "All planets orbit the Sun," "the Earth is a planet" so "the Earth orbits the Sun" is logically impeccable, but so is "all wooden things orbit the Sun," "the Earth is made of wood" so "the Earth orbits the Sun."

Good practice in science involves a great many subtle considerations, such as good judgment as to the plausibility of a model of unknown causal processes, or the limits of an analogy and so on. Whatever these may turn out to be, conformity to logic à la Russell is no criterion of rationality.

Logic rests its power on the principle that contradiction is anathema. There are some forms of "contradiction" that escape the Russellian way of embodying that proscription in formal principles of reasoning. These errors in thought are sometimes referred to as "pragmatic paradoxes." A discourse presents a pragmatic paradox when it asserts something that, were it to be true, would contradict one of the conditions for the possibility of making that assertion in the first place.

A notorious example is Kenneth Gergen's claim that there are no moral universals (Gergen 1999). In order to make that claim, the proposition that he utters must be intelligible in the framework of some language. But there are moral conditions for language to be possible. These have been spelled out by Holiday (1988) in his *Moral Powers*, as trust between speakers and hearers, respect between members of a linguistic community and respect

for the rituals by which meanings are established and maintained. Without these moral conditions, language could not exist as a medium of communication. So Gergen's denial that there are any moral universals contradicts a condition under which the statement "there are no moral universals" would be meaningful – namely that there are languages.

The "Irrationalities" of Psychology

"Scientific" psychology is a complementary case – the "best" practices of most of contemporary academic psychology are bad with respect to the task of acquiring reliable knowledge of human thought, action, emotion and perception, the traditional tasks of psychological research. The flaws that beset the current (but happily declining) mainstream are many, but among the most pervasive are the following:

1. Inferring an individual's propensity to behave in some particular way from the statistical distribution of that way of behaving among a group of which that individual is a member. Nothing at all can be inferred from such a distribution about an individual (Lamiell 2003).
2. Violating Vygotsky's Rule – which runs: do not analyze a psychological phenomenon into units or components that do not have the meaning that they had in their original location in a complex phenomenon. A striking example of the violation of this rule is Robert Zajonc's experiments of the relation between frequency and liking (Zajonc 1980). The frequency with which a meaningless item is presented to an experimental "subject" does not represent the psychologically relevant features of the frequency with which people meet one another in everyday life. So an experiment which purports to "measure" the amount of liking generated in a subject for a meaningless item presented more or less frequently in the experiment is worthless as proof that liking something, or more particularly someone, is related to frequency with which a person encounters it. What meaning the encounters might have is the critical variable.
3. Category Mistakes – these have been noted since antiquity, but our modern sense of their destructive role in attempts to found a scientific psychology we owe to Gilbert Ryle. (Ryle 1949). His illustration of this fallacy is well known – a person is shown the Oxford colleges and then asks to see the University believing the University is of the same category as a college, namely a locatable building. Thus we have Descartes' fallacy, the dualism of mind and body (Descartes 1641 [1949]): Matching a distinction in kinds of attributes, mental and material, with a hypothetical pair of substances apparently appropriate

only to each category of attributes. We presume the mind to be of the same category as the body, namely a substance. The mind is not a material substance, so it must be an immaterial substance. But an examination of the alleged mental attributes of a person shows that they are dispositions, not occurrent properties. They could be dispositions of a purely material substance, though of a unique kind – a person.

4. Mereological Fallacies -- these have been pointed out so frequently that the way that they continue to be committed by neuropsychologists is something of a scandal. From Coulter in the 1980s to Bennett and Hacker, in the twenty-first century we have been warned against attributing to a part of a person an attribute the meaning of which has been established in the context of the whole person. People think, their brains do not! This leaves open the question of just how we should think of our brains and their organs in relation to human practices.
5. Task-tool Fallacies – taking attributes of tools for attributes of the tasks they are used to perform (e.g., neuroscience presented as psychology). This could be presented as a special case of the pervasive "mereological fallacy," as it appears in psychology when a consequence is the deletion of persons. This is also an example of a pragmatic paradox since in order for there to be a society of neuroscientists they must treat each other as persons – and so to advocate a psychology without persons is self-destructive.

Running through the confusions of thought that are so evident in mainstream psychology, and in many other contexts, is a particular kind of failure to dig down to the presuppositions at the root of inappropriate discursive practices. This point was highlighted particularly by Wittgenstein (1953). He noticed, as many had before him, that there were some intellectual problems that seemed to be intractable but yet people persisted in struggling with them for centuries. How could this be? Wittgenstein suggested in a number of worked through cases that the intractability of the problem came about because of the deep location of a taken-for-granted dichotomy which was presupposed in the creation of the problem field. For example, if we continue to presume the distinction between mind and body as that between two substances (the Cartesian myth), we struggle to understand how we can know that other people have mental lives, how mental processes can bring about material changes in the body and so on. However, the mind/body dichotomy is not the only way to think of human life – suppose we abandon it and take up others, such as private discursive performances in contrast to public performances (here we

encounter Vygotsky again with his famous observation that all higher order mental functions occur first in social interactions and only later are appropriated by individuals). Another useful contrast might be between individual cognitive performances and cognitive processes that occur in the course of meaningful interactions between the members of a group. Or perhaps we might explore Wittgenstein's suggestion that the distinction between living and non-living beings should frame the concepts we set up for managing our research (Wittgenstein 1953, 284).

It is folly to persist in framing one's activities in terms of a dichotomy for which there are alternatives, alternatives which can be shown to avoid or defuse the problems that seemed to be repeated endlessly.

Achieving Intelligibility

If one were to ask for a formula which would allow us to achieve intelligibility and manage our activities in accord with canons of good practice, no such formula would be forthcoming. There are no trans-situational and trans-cultural and trans-disciplinary canons. Those who deny the reality of climate change, those who lend money recklessly, those who are attracted to conspiracy theories and all the rest of us from time to time, are locked into micro cultures of cognitive practices, closed to those who peer in anxiously and with amazement from the outside.

Is One's Own Experience of Follies of Value?

Reflecting on the myriad bad decisions I have made (some discernibly bad almost as they were made, though more often unfavourably assessed in hindsight), I notice two main features of decision making.

Some decisions are arrived at after much reflection and considering lists of pros and cons, while others are made on the spur of the moment. There does not seem, in hindsight, to be any advantage in careful reflection, at least with respect to the quality of the outcomes of each kind of decision process. So what seems to be a sure way to fall into irrationality, instant choice decision, has no discernible disadvantages.

On reflection, bad choices, foolish beliefs and silly actions (in hindsight of course) seem to be tied into the usual rag bag of personal vices such as self-indulgence, impatience, stupidity and the like. However, one feature that ties in with the rationality beyond which my choices often lie is the tendency, not to be found in my life alone, of mistaking a short term pattern for a long term trend.

Banal but Potent Psychological Explanations of Folly

Stupidity and Some Kinds of Madness

It may be that someone has the basic skills to reason more or less correctly. Failure to understand the situation, relevant considerations and so on is typical of people with mental troubles. Crazy beliefs and good logic are the keys to understanding the legal definition of insanity based on the M'Naghten Rule (Robinson 1998).

Failure to Reason Correctly

This can happen even when a situation and its demands are understood in a reasonable way. Bad reasoning is very common as the prelude to acts of folly, be they cognitive or practical. We all tend to fall into some of the classic fallacies such as affirming the consequent (e.g., if it's raining it will be wet; it's wet so it must have been raining) and not noticing that we have violated the rule against an undistributed middle term (all birds sing, and all birds build nests, so all singers build nests).

Pragmatic Folly

In its simplest form, we could exemplify this kind of folly in the case of the resentment of the alienated leading someone to choose a form of revenge against real or imagined oppressors that runs counter to one's best interests according to other criteria. One surely regrets choosing the brief satisfaction of revenge at a huge cost to oneself in the long run; one might rightly accuse himself of folly in hindsight.

Semantic Fields Fallacy

The fallacy comes about through the presumption that the variety of uses of some important word in a language must be underpinned by a common meaning. In other words, one extracts a putative linguistic essence from a diverse semantic field and theorises in terms of it (e.g., introducing new categories of entities). Wittgenstein worked out many cases of this fallacy – suppose that the many ways we use the word "thought" must have an underlying common meaning, so we struggle to invent one. For example, people have defended the idea of thoughts as immaterial objects behind all sorts of cognitive activities. There are lots of examples of "being guided" -- but is there an essence of "guidance" common to them all? There is no such essence – only a network of similarities and differences ("war" is another example – "democracy" yet another). So there is no one way that words really guide the reader!

Concluding Remarks

These explorations have brought out two main points of importance for conversations of the moment.

a. They have opened up a variety of situations in which conventional ideas of the rationality of thought and action can be called into question. Whatever the rationality of science is, it is not explicated by turning to the principles of logic. If we assessed the sciences in those terms, they would show themselves to be exemplars of irrationality. There are never enough reasons to accept hypotheses or reject them in accord with the strictest logical principles of reasoning. Nor are there ever enough reasons to distinguish between one theory and another. There are powerful cognitive practices beyond the bounds of conventional rationality that analysis allows or reveals as "good" and "bad" indigenous forms of conversational propriety and practical action. From where do those good and bad assessments come?

b. However, there are some canons that are important in making negative judgments about the quality of some enterprises – the example of "mainstream scientific" psychology is rich in follies that render its findings of little value. The odd thing about this situation is how hard it has proved to be to get this enterprise back on track -- and how hard those whose careers have been wasted by a life time of producing artefacts of method have fought to retain their intellectual chains.

c. On the positive side, the advent of cultural/discursive psychology has brought to the fore a mode in which conversations and other meaningful sequences of actions are ordered. This is the role of the story-line or narrative convention that shapes thought and action. Along with this insight has come the realization that the beliefs people have about their rights and duties to think, act and even to feel in certain ways, are powerful factors in shaping the way life goes forward, and, as analytical categories in explaining the unfolding of episodes.

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CHAPTER TWO

EVOLVED IRRATIONALITY

MAX STEUER

Finding root causes is like peeling back an onion. Each explanation gives rise to further questions…
—Joseph Stiglitz

Irrationality can be distinguished from simple mistakes in thinking and from holding mis-beliefs. The borders are fuzzy, but central tendencies can be identified. Several researchers explain irrationality and related aberrations by making reference to mental adaptations that were useful in the past, but are maladaptive now. In contrast to this view, it is argued here that the evolved emotional nature of thought provides a more convincing explanation of the contribution of evolution to irrationality.

What is "Irrationality"?

We all agree that there is much irrationality in the world. What constitutes irrationality, and why it comes about, is more contentious. In this chapter, I explore the potential contribution of our evolutionary origins to certain manifestations of irrationality. The workings of our evolved brains are but one possible source of irrationality. Culture is another potential contributing factor. Separating the operations of our physical mental organs from the cultures in which they operate is not straightforward, but I will attempt to do so. In other words, I ask if natural selection, by shaping our evolved brains, has contributed to the prevalence of irrationality. My answer to this question is a much qualified "yes," and I suggest that this influence does not come from the more direct route suggested by some researchers. My main conjecture is that the role of emotions in thinking itself is a major contributor to the irrationality which is so common in human affairs. To illustrate this proposition, I will begin by reporting on some exchanges I had with a colleague of mine in the

Economics Department at the London School of Economics. These exchanges were prompted by the military coup in Greece in 1967. My colleague was a Greek national and he surprised me by being in favour of the Colonels' coup. I knew him to be a fair minded and liberal thinker, like myself, and assumed that like me he would be opposed to military dictatorship.

My colleague and I had a series of discussions about what had gone on in Greece. I knew virtually nothing about Greek history or politics, and was inclined to oppose the coup on fairly familiar grounds often used in defence of democracy. Our discussions usually began with my colleague outlining the special circumstances which obtained in Greece at the time. It was these special circumstances which led him to support the Colonels. I questioned whether the arguments he made were consistent with other views I knew he held regarding human freedom and other related matters. After some careful discussion, my colleague agreed that his defence of the coup was mistaken, and agreed that his position failed to take sufficient account of the importance he attached, and incidentally I also attached, to what could broadly be identified as democratic values. In other words, his defence of the coup was inconsistent with his other views. These other views were, in his view, of paramount importance, so he left my office after an hour or two of discussion expressing the view that he was now opposed the coup.

After a couple of weeks, there was a knock on my door and my colleague was back. He wanted to explain to me that after due consideration of all the arguments, he had abandoned the view he expressed to me last time and he now supported the coup. The purpose of his visit was to allow him to explain the grounds for this change in position. If I fully appreciated certain elements of the Greek situation, I would see why he had reverted to his initial position of support for the Colonels, and he was confident that I would also support the coup, once I knew more about it. Another hour or two followed which covered essentially the same ground as in the previous discussion. The conclusion was the same. My colleague now felt that his support of the coup was inconsistent with other views he held and that these views took precedence, so he once again left my office holding the view that he was in opposition to the coup.

Yet another fortnight passed, and my colleague was back once more. He wanted to explain to me why in fact he supported the Colonels and why military dictatorship was good for Greece, as implausible as that might seem. To be honest, I cannot remember whether we had three, four or five such sessions, all identical in content and conclusion. Eventually, I