

How Rational is Rationality?

How rational thought functions as social control

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There is something faulty with the concept of humans as rational animals. It defines humanity by a limited criterion and tries to separate humans from our animal being. This sets up a hierarchy in which the true human is defined by the portion of the brain that is rational. Perhaps, even worse than the idea of the rational animal is the idea of the “rationalizing animal.” Pratkanis and Aronson in their 2001 *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, place this as a central factor in how we are manipulated.

The authors argue that “no matter how irrationally we might actually behave, we attempt to appear reasonable to ourselves and others.” This is the idea that the rational basis of human thought is an illusion. A person makes up their mind and then rationalizes to justify their decision. This minimizes the value of the influence of emotion on consciousness, not to mention the mysterious processes of consciousness. Rationality is mechanistic, while consciousness is not. The rational is made sacred.

Rational thought is important, but not as universally so as we’ve been taught to believe. It seems to work best as an evaluation tool. It can help to determine the validity of an idea or action. It does not seem to be able to create these ideas.

It may be that rationality is not the best way to make a decision. This is particularly true with split second ones. A purely rational process is too slow. Rationality is a part of such decision making and consciousness, but it occurs previous to the situation.

Two interesting examples are learning martial arts and musical instruments. There is a rational process in developing these skills at the outset. However, a person quickly begins to develop muscle memory. Skills become embedded in the parts of the body engaging in the action. It’s hard to tell where the skill is coming from once you know how to do it, because you no longer have to think about it. In fact, to be proficient you need to be able to do without thinking. This relates to the Zen concepts of “no-mind” and “no-thought.”

Humans are capable of much more than being flesh robots. Why do so many of us fall so far short in creative capacities? A limited sort of instrumental rationality is part of the answer. People are trained and conditioned in a technical manner. We are trained to cut off mysterious aspects of consciousness such as intuition and imagination.

Unfortunately this reduction works synergistically with concepts of consciousness found in artificial intelligence (AI). The portions of consciousness that can be simulated are those that are the most concrete. This is a limited portion of the mind. Yet rather than admit this, AI scientists often attempt to define the portions most easily understood as the basis of consciousness.

In his 2002 *Running on Emptiness, Fifth Estate* contributor John Zerzan, writes, “In terms of what [computers] are capable of, it seems to me, when you have the distance narrowing between humans and machines in the sense that if we are becoming more machine-like, it’s easier to see the machines as more human-like.”

The use of rationality with its emphasis on thought, reasoning, and logic in our educational system fulfills a social control function. This sort of thinking is well suited for engineers and technicians, but discourages rebellion. There is also a focus on low level rationality for those destined for proletarian positions in the economic hierarchy.

In the best case this comes in the form of learning a trade. In the worst, it teaches children to follow directions in order to perform menial tasks. This is no less true for the managers and bureaucrats who administer the economy and the state. However, it is more than a specific tactic. It is a generalized control system. Theodore Roszak, a critic of technocracy and industrial society, writes in his 1986 *The Cult of Information*:

“What computer enthusiasts overlook is the fact that data glut is not some unforeseen, accidental fluctuation of supply, like a bumper crop of wheat. It is a strategy of social control, deliberately and often expertly wielded. It is one of the main ways in which modern government and interest groups obfuscate issues to their own advantage; they dazzle and distract with more raw data than the citizenry can hope to sort through.”

You can see this in the form of the news junky that spends a massive amount of screen time watching news trying to remain informed. Average viewing is now almost seven hours daily among adults. Yet they’ve rendered themselves entirely passive and without agency. Rationality attempts to portray itself as objective and neutral. But objectivity is a reflection of “the consciousness that prevails in the society by which and for which this neutrality is established,” wrote philosopher Herbert Marcuse in 1964.

This creates a specific concept of reality, firmly embedded within the dominant paradigm, within the reality tunnel promoted by elites. A new paradigm does not simply grow through an accumulation of new data, it comes from looking at the data differently. By remaining within the rules of the dominant reality we have predetermined a losing outcome, or as Marcuse wrote in his *One-Dimensional Man*, “It is a rational universe which, by the mere weight and capabilities of its apparatus, blocks all escape.”

Marcuse argued that technological, totalitarian society creates conditions in which there are no options. Instrumental rationality creates a scenario where the only reasonable possibility is “submission to the technical apparatus which enlarges the comforts of life and increases the productivity of labor. Technological rationality thus protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination, and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society.”

Criticism of rationality doesn’t mean that anti-intellectualism should be promoted. Instead that wisdom comes from many better forms than pure data: novels, or poetry, or from doing, or expanding oneself. The individual cannot arm their desires if they have none. Desires are profoundly irrational, and so are many other things we value: joy, freedom, and love.

It isn’t a matter of eliminating rationality, but of putting it in the proper place. Rationality is not a separate and discrete aspect of consciousness. It’s impossible to separate one aspect from the others; they are reciprocally connected. Ideally we should be seeking an integration of the intellect and our wicked passions.

By making rationality something separate and then placing it in a hierarchy, we create a populace of disarmed and powerless people. Rationally we know we will probably lose in an insurrection.

The rational doesn’t allow for the joy of struggle regardless of victory or defeat. It can only enable us to look at direct effects. The free person, the anarchist, is an irrational entity.

Jason Rodgers’ zine, *Transgression or Affirmation*, and other publications are available from them at POB 10894, Albany NY 12201



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