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Review Article

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Rational Stupidity

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Abstract

In philosophical terms, stupidity may be viewed as a three-way compromise among: “Pragmatic rationality”-how well individuals maximize the satisfaction of their desires, given their schemas; “Epistemic rationality”-the internal consistency of the schemas; and “Theoretical rationality-how well the schemas represent the external world. All this would be much easier for cognitive theorists³ to understand and accept were it not for the schematic legacy of the Age of Reason.

Keywords: Epistemic rationality; Human behaviour; Knowledge

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, people sought to understand their world and achieve an accurate and internally consistent picture of its complexities [1-4]. Rationalists thought that people, like Newton, dealt with reality in an analytical, reasonable manner, with emotions under the direction of cognitive factors⁴ and, for example, on the political front in democracies, cast an informed vote according to their best interest after having studied the relevant issues [5] Although there are very few sworn rationalists left, due to the fact that people so frequently deviate from the norms of reason [6] (e.g., voting irrationally according to emotions or appearances), many students of human behaviour are still enthralled by the assumption that people are reasonable and wise-as in Homo “sapiens”, [7] meaning wise.

Confusion as to the relationship of wisdom [8] to knowledge has likewise impeded our understanding of ourselves for years, proving the self-confirming point that while we are a learned animal, we are appallingly slow learners. Ironically, the greatest obstacle to our learning has not been genetic or physiological but the stock of accumulated illusions (aka “Knowledge”) we have created for ourselves. Evasions, suppressions, and lies have created a missive store of misinformation [9] Put another way, Rousseau observed that “Our minds have been corrupted in proportion” to the improvement of human knowledge [10] That is, the better our knowledge, the more it defines/confines us.

Two hundred years ago, rationalists believed that as we learned more about our world we would become wiser. That belief is no longer tenable. Knowledge accumulates; wisdom does not. For all our vaunted skills in communication, we still learn pretty much as do rats, with little wisdom (i.e., not intellect [11]) passed on from one generation to the next and even less developed by public schools-which are tasked with passing on superstitions, taboos and condoms [12] Worse yet, each generation finds a new way to mess itself up because we do not behave even like knowledgeable rats. As knowledge accumulates, so do misconceptions, old wives’ tales and idiotic ideas and beliefs of all sorts as well. These do as much to shape our behaviour as do immediate circumstances, since it is through our cognitive world that the stimuli we perceive are interpreted, evaluated and accepted as the basis for our behaviour.

The rationalists could not comprehend the nature of stupidity, intelligence or humanity because they viewed the universe as a Manichaen expression of ideals in logical conflict with their opposites -good vs. evil, God vs. the Devil, etc. They did not perceive healthy behaviour as a balance or blending of social needs with environmental conditions and group goals with syntactic limits. Rationalists did posit a super egoish ideal personality which would presumably provide a perfect fit for an individual into a perfectly smug society in heaven. However, they failed to appreciate how wasteful it was to divine philosophical systems which were internally consistent but functionally useless because they existed only in splendid, cerebral isolation. In fact, it was exactly such effete thinking that characterized the unenlightened Germanic revival of the ancient Greek tradition of impractical

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philosophy in the eighteenth century. In that age, when prevailing Christian values were being challenged if not undermined, France ruled the land, England ruled the seas and Germany ruled the air. The Teutonic schemas, so beautiful in their logical consistency, did not relate to a these being psychology's equivalent of geography's "Flat-earthers": see Fishbein and Ajzen for an astounding, recent example. anything real, and as Kantb never quite got around to pointing out, there are really only two good, valid criticisms of pure reason-one is that it is pure; the other is that it is reasonable.

A corollary of Kant's rationalism was a naive moralism smacking of Socratic idiocy. His "Categorical imperative" is really a good old Germanic Golden Rule¹⁶ rather than the new version—that he who has the gold rules. The assumption is purity of intent with all conflicts resolvable by good-faith reasoning while bad-faith reasons would come around under the influence of patient coaxing of good natured negotiators. This attitude was alive if feeble in the late 1970's as evinced by President Jimmy Carter in his benign approach to military matters when dealing with the hard-nosed Russians.

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