

Are You Ever Irrational? David Pugmire

O Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.

St Augustine

At bottom I am afraid, but I haven't admitted it to myself.

Wittgenstein

I hold many firm beliefs, with some of which I disagree.

George W. Bush

Aristotle famously defined human beings as 'rational animals', the emphasis being on the first of these two words. Later, Shakespeare has Hamlet characterise human beings as 'in conception how like a god'; and later still Kant made reason the basis of our freedom, our power to use our minds for the best, to preside over our responses to what the world throws at us. But for most of us there come moments when this all seems like whistling in the dark: often we seem to let ourselves down. Some of our attitudes and choices seem surprising and perplexing, even to us, let alone to others. And there are cynics who would never have rated us highly: 'the flesh is weak!' In Eden, tempted where we knew better, we threw away paradise. Very often the phrase, 'human nature' is used to connote fecklessness and incorrigibility.

What exactly lies behind all these potent but confusing assertions? Are we vulnerable to true irrationality? And what would that be? Rationality, so charmingly and vexingly absent in young children, for example, applies primarily to thinking and acting; and accordingly, it is in these two areas that irrationality would be found.

As Descartes' **thinking things**, our beliefs are no longer directly and automatically triggered by our perceptions, as they may once have been in our prehuman ancestors. Our minds are not in the thrall of brute perceptual fact. We *form* our beliefs; and we do that by deliberating and reaching judgements, however carefully or carelessly. Now, belief aims at truth. Arguably, one can't actually believe what does not at least appear true; and one cannot but believe what does appear true. ('That's right, but I doubt it' hardly makes sense, except for the American President.) Compelling reasons for something compel belief. (In Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith maintains that no kind of suffering can make him *think* as opposed to *say* that $2+2=5$, that belief, at least, can't be politicised.)

Similarly, as **practical beings** we are unlike phototropic insects that have to seek light where they find it, even in a candle flame. We don't just react to stimuli but can consider and choose how to react. When we reason about what to do we are seeking to determine what, under the circumstances, would be for the best. (Whether this means for the best *morally* or not is part of what has to be decided here.) If beliefs aim at the true, actions aim at the good. The grounds for a choice lie in some worth that one finds in it. Thus, where there is no 'desirability characterisation' of an option, it is hard to see how there

could be any motive for it, how it could be explained and therefore how it could happen. It is questionable, for instance – as Elizabeth Anscombe observed – whether anyone could be deemed to just want a saucer of mud. If so, it would seem to follow that where a given choice is clearly seen as better than the alternatives there could be no adequate motivation for any other choice. Of course, I can choose something that *you* think the worst of, but how could I choose something that *I myself* really did, at bottom, view as the worst course?

Perhaps, then, irrationality is impossible. It is hard to understand how I could believe where I see that matters remain inconclusive or how I could take the plunge where that strikes me as a mistake. Perhaps our perversities of thought and action – our blatant delusions and self-destructiveness – are not strictly irrational but more *nonrational*. The two are not to be confused. Thus, the failure properly to use our powers to deliberate and understand what really confronts us, before forming beliefs or taking action is very common. Indeed, care with these things does not come easily, and we are not always adequately educated and habituated to it. Also, mere omissions to make use of our rational faculties abound. People are often impulsive and just don't bother to think at all ('Oh, what the hell!' 'I just felt like it') or don't reflect with sufficient patience ('I guess I rushed the gun').

Again, despite best efforts people may be confused or unaware of important factors. Evidence can be vague and susceptible of interpretation, and one cannot prevaricate forever. Weaknesses and difficulties of such kinds might absorb all the cases we are tempted to regard as irrational.

Do they? What would downright irrationality be? It would surely involve, in the case of action, going ahead with something in the realisation that I am thereby letting myself down (rather than realizing only in retrospect that it wasn't for the best); and in the case of belief, clinging to or insisting on something but unsettled at the thinness of the case for it. My position would need to strike me as forlorn or desperate, unless I am just oblivious (and then I am just not rational). Are there any structures of thought and action that could manifest themselves in this way? (At this point try for yourself to comb personal experience, literature, and history for examples and then to sift these for the principles they involve, always asking the question: Has reason lost its grip here, or has it just not laid hold?)

In **self deception** I seem to believe something in the teeth of what I know; I contrive to believe what I know better than to believe. Here are two candidates in rather abstract form:

- (1) Belief in the innocence of someone whose guilt is obvious or proven.
- (2) Belief that a hopeless war is winnable.

The status of these cannot be decided without detailed examination of specific cases. Such examination could reveal some interesting possibilities in the shape of stratagems

for sustaining belief or action against better judgement. Thus, a person might ignore adverse evidence in the belief that it *might* be overwhelming (note: he hasn't examined the evidence, so his belief isn't that it is overwhelming but that it might be, or probably is, and that is why he averts his eye from it). In the last days of World War II, the German armaments minister, Albrecht Speer, who was the only person Hitler would listen to, was deputised to get the fact of the German collapse through to Hitler. He prepared a document carefully setting out the realities and was careful to preface it with the conclusion: 'The war is irretrievably lost.' Hitler's reaction was to read this opening sentence, shut the report and lock it away in a safe, exclaiming, 'Don't depress me today!'

Again, one might actually look the evidence in the face but bit by bit, without seeing, or thinking about what it adds up to; one sees the trees but not the forest. Finally, one might confront the evidence, and realise full well where it points and yet still hold out on the grounds that what looks decisive may not be, that evidence is seldom conclusive and there may be a saving explanation somewhere that has yet to emerge. Or, more stubbornly, that the conclusion just can't be true, therefore it isn't and so there *must* be hidden faults in the evidence. In a more creative version of this, which could be termed *faith*, the 'evidence' could be reconstrued in light of one's unshakeable belief, so that, for instance, damning behaviour tending to confirm the worst is represented sympathetically as the defensive flailings of a victim. This could be done out of a genuine, not to say ingenuous, faith in the person ('It just can't be as it looks!'), but then we have a case of naivete and so of mere nonrationality. But if this insistence on putting the best face on things is peremptory and dogmatic and recognised as such by the person inventing the excuses, then we come closer to genuine irrationality. We still haven't arrived at that point, however, until this person actually has the thought that these excuses are mistaken. Yet that seems to remove the belief that made him self-deceived.

Two general candidates for irrationality of practice, or **weakness of will**, would be:

- (1) Smoking or eating unhealthy food, whilst believing that the risk from this is unacceptable.
- (2) Letting oneself watch television instead of preparing for a crucial exam the next day, which one recognises to be foolish.

In such cases of feckless letting go one seems knowingly and freely to choose what one regards as the worst alternative at the time. This sort of thing is both very common and very puzzling. There seems just no room here for adequate motivation. Are these perverse lapses in self-discipline really what they seem?

Notice that weakness of will may not be fully analogous to self deception. It is arguable that for me to realise that something must be (or cannot be) true, is for my belief to change accordingly. Between how I think the reasons stand and what I then believe there is no wiggle room. By contrast, there may be a narrow but fateful gap between appreciating where the practical reasons point and acting accordingly. The idea is that what I judge to be all in all the best may not be what I *desire* most strongly. The force of

renegade desire may be enough to loosen the grip of better judgement without altering that judgement. In Homer's *Odyssey*, even great Ulysses knows that the prospect of certain death on the Sirens' rocks cannot be trusted to protect him from the beguilement of Sirens' songs and so as their deadly sweet island comes within earshot he has himself bound to the mast and orders his sailors to disregard any of his subsequent orders.

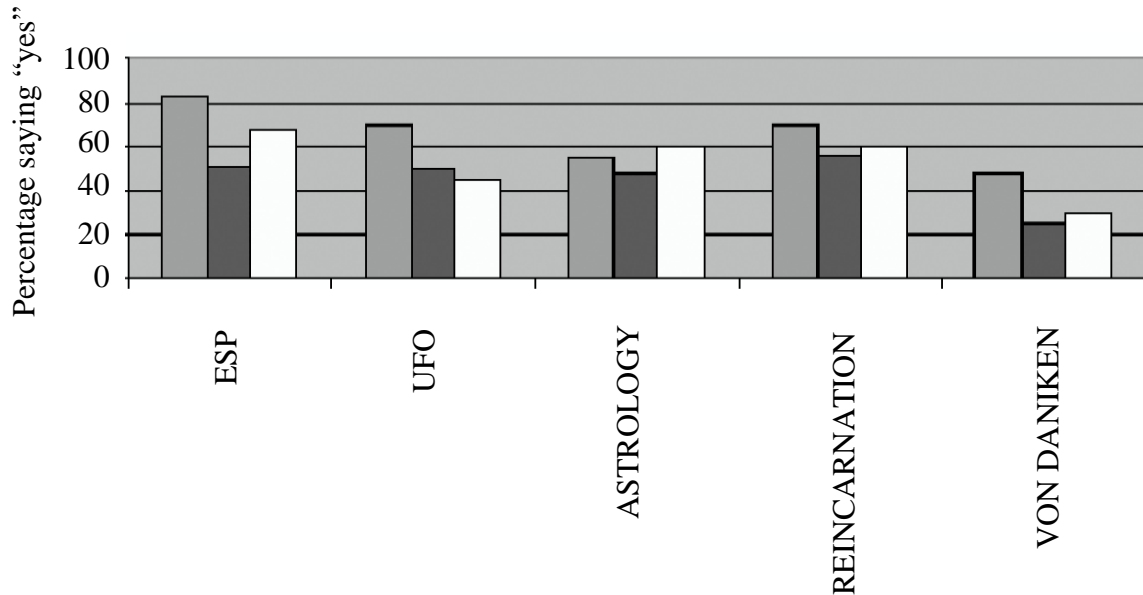
This allows two ways of understanding apparent lapses of choice. Sometimes one's judgment itself is swayed (and perhaps sometimes rightly swayed) by the proximity of temptation: 'My goodness! This *is* lovely!' One has just changed one's mind --a mistake maybe, as one realises later, but not irrational. One forgets, temporarily, how important the interview is. Or one is under no illusion that, say, the risks from smoking are definitely not worth taking, but they are not incurred by this *particular* cigarette, nor by any other one cigarette, and each cigarette is, of course, just one. So, enjoy! In what look like harder cases ('What's wrong with me? How can I do this?'), the independence of desire from deliberated judgement can be invoked. This way out of irrationality would, however, be blocked if the source and force of *desires* has to be explained by the worth we see in the things we desire --judgements again.

Suppose there are really hard cases of self deceit and weakness of will that resist all attempts to make sense of them. Some philosophers claim that this would oblige us to postulate a split in the mind in which the reasoning that warns us against the inferior choice occurs and its conclusion grasped but is partitioned off from the rest of the mind in which the reasons favouring this choice are able to decide the day. Then all our reasonings are rational and our choice is also rational in light of the reasons that produced it, although it remains the worst choice, as we impotently and forlornly recognise. Maybe in the end we are never truly irrational, but at the very least we are a great deal more complicated than we imagine.

David Pugmire
Department of Philosophy
University of Southampton

Addendum

The following chart suggests the power of believing as we fancy despite knowing better. It does not encourage optimism about education! - note that what is at issue here is not the **truth** of the beliefs but the sway over us of insight into the **evidence** for them: despite the patchiness of the evidence all the beliefs could be true, and for many this logical possibility is a welcome bolthole. (What is your favourite conspiracy theory?)



Changes in the percentage of students expressing belief as a result of university course specifically addressing the issue of belief in paranormal phenomena. The follow-up was conducted one year after the end of the course. 'Educational Experience and Belief in Paranormal Phenomena', Thomas Gray, p31, *Cult Archaeology and Creationism*, edited by Francis Harold and Raymond Eve (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995).