RATIONALITY AND SOCIAL PROCESS[1]

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At a time when rational problem-solving, informed by a scientific approach, is urgently demanded by the larger problems that confront mankind, social rationality with respect to these problems seems to be the exception rather than the rule. This situation, I submit, has been disheartening to psychologists with some commitment to concern about social issues. Our research morale has rested in part on an un-examined assumption of social rationality: that if we as scientists could ascertain the relevant facts, the truth would prevail. Our morale has therefore been vulnerable to experience that has seemed to question this assumption. Perhaps as social psychologists we should inquire more closely into the conceptual status of rationality in our models of human nature. From a modern social psychological point of view, is there a place for rationality? To me, this is not very different from the question recently posed by Robert M. Hutchins[2], "Is Democracy Possible?"

RATIONALITY AND THE TRADITIONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS

The model of man embraced by the traditional political philosophers of democracy, we remember, assumed generous components of rationality. Over the years, the liberals, the friends of democracy have generally espoused the view of man as rational and perfectable, in opposition to the conservative apologists of authority and tradition, who typically have shown little faith in man's rational capacities and propensities. In one guise or another, an assumption of underlying rationality is closely woven into the fabric of democratic ideology.

British empiricism. Yet the psychological status of rationality was already suspect in the philosophical psychology of the British tradition, close as it was to major strands of democratic political philosophy. With the demise of faculty psychology, Reason lost its honored place as an active power of the mind (a place reserved for it, to be sure, in Continental thought that was later to influence the doctrines of the

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Gestalt school). In the writings of British empiricism we encounter rationality as something extrinsic and a little incongruous. Thus *reflection* in Locke, a principle of mental activity out of keeping with his view of the sense-given composition of the mind. By the time that the British school had arrived at the pat amalgam of association and hedonism that formed the psychological underpinning of utilitarian doctrine, to speak, as Bentham did, of *enlightened* self-interest was to beg a large psychological question. Whence, psychologically, the grounds for assuming enlightenment? Indeed the machinery of contiguous association seems ill equipped to perform the rational feats of hedonistic calculus, unless guided by some sort of "invisible hand," as in Adam Smith's metaphor for the convergence of individual and general interests. The individual and social rationality, so dear to the laissez-faire liberals, was a matter of faith and assumption in its own right, hardly congruent with the central aspects of their psychological model.

Evolution. When we turn to currents in the systematic psychology of yesterday and the day before, we find little reason for encouragement. True, the Darwinian revolution that set the scene for contemporary psychologies called attention to the adaptive functions of intelligence. But the emphasis in evolutionary doctrine on continuity between man and beast, on instinct, and on residues of the eternal struggle of tooth and claw, counterbalanced the biological sanction that it gave to concern with man's rational potentialities. If the theory of evolution set Galton and his successors to considering individual differences in intelligence, it also, and in our present context perhaps more significantly, contributed to dethroning man from his erstwhile special position as a uniquely rational being.

Psychoanalysis. Freud and psychoanalysis of course carried the dethronement much farther, ironically, when one considers Freud's personal devotion to rational values, his therapeutic and social goal of extending the boundaries of reality-tested critical awareness at the expense of blind impulse and its derivatives. The Freudian assault on man's pretentions to rationality had at least three prongs. First, it elaborated upon the pleasure-pain doctrine of hedonism by identifying specific instinctual drives. As sources of motivation, these sexual and aggressive strivings are not merely *non-rational*, like the unspecified wants blanketed under the utilitarian formula of self-interest, but distinctly *irrational* in that operating outside the scope of normal awareness, they are repugnant to a person's conscious standards. The de-

vious manifestations of these drives in thought and behavior, as revealed by psychoanalysis, secondly, showed no respect for the canons of logic. The lawfulness seen by Freud in dreams and psychotic delusions as well as in normal behavior has little to do with rationality. The third prong in the psychoanalytic attack is a corollary of the foregoing. All that glitters is not gold, said the psychoanalysts, opening the way for the enthusiastic and indiscriminate debunking of human pretensions by those who caught this much of the psychoanalytic message. Where rationality is claimed, suspect rationalization; where values are asserted, look for sublimated drive derivatives! The significant psychological events, the important determinants of behavior, lie outside the sphere of conscious rationality, which now takes the aspect of a facade, and a misleading one at that. It was this version of psychoanalysis, no doubt a selective caricature, that in popular versions worked as a strong corrosive to disfigure the image of human rationality.

Behaviorism. Under behaviorism and its successors in American psychology, this image has fared little better. Watson preached the doctrine of association by contiguity all over again, together with rejection on metaphysical grounds of intention and awareness, ingredients of most views of rational action. Hull and the behaviorists of the later generation set out on their part to account for "knowledge and purpose as habit mechanisms" and to find, in the spirit of Darwin, a mechanistic explanation for adaptive behavior. But the principles of reinforcement on which they relied seem ill-designed to encompass behavior in which immediate tension reduction or reward is forgone for the sake of consequences envisioned in a broader contact or a longer run. Psychologists in this tradition (9) have written of the "neurotic paradox," that organisms can pathologically persist in self-defeating responses in spite of reinforcement principles. If one grant that neurotic symptoms evade or palliate immediate anxiety, it is "normal" rational behavior, with its delayed gratifications, its postponement of reinforcement, its orientation to spatially and temporally distal "stimuli," that would seem the more paradoxical from the standpoint of reinforcement theory.

Gestalt psychology. Of the major strands in recent psychological theorizing, only Gestalt psychology and the loosely derivative cognitive and "phenomenological" theories can be regarded as at all hospitable to the notion of human rationality. These views have of course had only a minority voice in American psychology, although it cannot

be accidental that social psychologists have more frequently been in-
fluenced by them than others.

As we know, the Gestalt tradition recognized, even emphasized,
the phenomena of intelligent thought and behavior. But as a contend-
ing model for depicting the place of rationality in human nature, it
presents its substantial difficulties. There is, for one thing, the difficult
leap to be made between the phenomenal or brain field with its in-
trinsic tendencies toward good structure, on the one hand, and events
in the non-psychological world, on the other: the problem of relations
between psychological and objective environments, or, phrased differ-
ently, that of veridicality, a crucial one for the conceptualization and
analysis of socially rational behavior. And the indubitably irrational
is left, in Gestalt treatments such as Asch's (1), as a residual category
rather than explored for its own kinds of lawfulness; the manifest
aspects of blindness and cussedness in human nature rather than its
reasonableness now are matters for perplexity. To make much head-
way in understanding the conditions and limitations under which
rational—and irrational—thought and behavior occur, we must pro-
ceed, it seems to me, in terms of functionalist principles that have
somehow been foreign to the orthodox Gestaltist. Cognitive functional
psychologies such as Bruner's (3) may give us more help here.

Recent developments along these lines, and perhaps others such as
the formal decision theory that is currently taking shape through re-
lated efforts by psychologists, economists, and students of organiza-
tion (6), may be changing the picture that I have drawn. But it still
seems just to conclude from our scanning of the psychological currents
that have brought us to today that these currents have for the most
part flowed in directions unsupportive of faith in man's rational
potentialities.

A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF RATIONALITY

Where do the perspectives of social psychology fit into this picture?
Solomon Asch, in introducing his eloquent polemic for a Gestalt-in-
spired version of social psychology, offers at once a bleak appraisal
and a challenge when he writes:

It has to be admitted that social psychology lives today in the shadow of great
doctrines of man that were formulated long before it appeared and that it has
borrowed its leading ideas from neighboring regions of scientific thought and from
the social philosophies of the modern period. It is paradoxical but true that social
psychology has thus far made the least contribution to the questions that are its
special concern and that it has as yet not significantly affected the conceptions it
has borrowed (1, p. viii).

Asch's answer to his own challenge, as we know, was primarily one of importing "the leading ideas" of Gestalt psychology, and the many of us who have been moved and impressed by his book can only agree that they are a leavening influence at his hands.

But need we accept his indictment of social psychology apart from what Gestalt can bring to it? Has it had nothing to add to our perspective on the place of rationality in human nature?

What was once the conceptual core of social psychology, the stock "mechanisms of social interaction"—imitation, suggestion, and sympathy—are surely vulnerable to Asch's critique. Borrowed from French psychopathology or heavily influenced by it, they give an oddly lunatic portrayal of the basis of social relations if we take them as a literal and sufficient account. Asch is also quite correct, I think, that much of what has passed as social psychological theory has consisted of applying theories and concepts developed in other contexts, and embraced and defended for reasons fundamentally extrinsic to the problems of social psychology.

The interactionist approach. Granted all this, I still think that Asch is selling social psychology short when he omits explicit notice of the tradition that, as I would think, can make the most valid claim to being distinctively social-psychological. His neglect is the more surprising in that much of his own analysis of social interaction so clearly belongs to it. I have in mind, let me say at once, the line of thought initiated primarily by G. H. Mead (8), and C. H. Cooley (4), nurtured by social psychologists bearing the credentials of sociology, assimilating relevant contributions from Piaget (12) and Sullivan (14), and embraced and developed by a recent generation of social psychologists within psychology—Newcomb (11) among others—who derive from it a distinctive focus for social psychology among the behavioral sciences. As I observed elsewhere, it seems to me:

One of the most hopeful features of the current situation . . . is the emergence from diverse quarters of incipient consensus on a model that rejects the sterile dichotomy of isolated individual vs. disembodied group. . . . This new-old model has many variants in the hands of different theorists. But its minimal features can be quickly delineated. It takes its start not from individuals or socio-cultural entities but from the interactions of persons. . . . In any functioning social group, according to this view, the isolated individual is a misleading artifact. Persons achieve communication and avoid randomness in their relationships because each already embodies much of the socio-cultural system in microcosm. That is, the symbol-systems, beliefs, and expectations of one another shared by members of a social group, the modified or emergent motives, aspirations, and standards of evaluation learned in group experience, so transform man as a biological entity that he exists always in implicit relation to others. The notion of men as social atoms somehow to be brought into significant relation to one another is simply a myth. . . .

> Diachronically, the model suggests that in the process of social interaction, the actor learns through time to become the sort of person who is capable of the orderly social relationships in which we later encounter him. . . . Through socialization, culture, which at the outset of the life-cycle is exterior to the person and constraining upon him, as Durkheim would have it, becomes internalized—inextricably incorporated in his very make-up (13, pp. 64-65).

Within this frame of reference, social psychology has dual foci: *socialization*, when our concern is with the events and processes that build into people the potentiality for orderly social behavior, and *communication*, when we are concerned with social behavior at a particular point of time. Each of these focal processes instrinsically depends on the other.

I submit that this is really the way that most of us have come to frame our thinking about the problems of social psychology, that it is different from the orientations predominant among psychologists a generation or so ago, and—to revert to Asch's challenge—that viewing social psychology from this perspective casts many of the "great doctrines of man" in a usefully different light. It has cut aside venerable pseudo-problems and posed new sets of fundamental issues for research. Attaining it, I would argue, is no mean achievement for social psychology.

A social psychological look at the problem of rationality from this standpoint sees it not as a given, inhering in human nature in fixed amount, but as a primarily social *achievement* and a social *process*. Our principal clues here come from Mead (8) and from Piaget (12); my general approach is also obviously much indebted to John Dewey (5). Mead had the insight, still insufficiently checked and elaborated by direct investigation, that in psychological development, reflective selfhood and language are jointly acquired in the course of social interaction that becomes increasingly communicative as the process continues. Because a person becomes able to react to or interpret his own words and actions as his partner does—able to "take the role of the other," in Mead's phrase—he can steer his own participation in the interaction to his instrumental advantage. By the same token he anticipates the reaction of the other and acquires perspective on his own activity. Participating in different relationships within socially structured contexts he comes eventually to internalize the role of the "generalized other," as a stabilized source of self-perspective and of community of meaning.

Piaget's familiar early studies enrich and supplement this account. We see the child—and it may very well matter that the child is a participant in modern Western civilization—moving from egocentric-

ity and absolutism in his judgments to reciprocity and the perspectival relativism more characteristic of adult thinking. And we get inklings of the underlying social process.

Social ingredients of rationality. Analysis along these lines suggests that at least four indispensible ingredients of rationality are products of social interaction, acquired by the child during socialization: first, a stock of symbols, counters for rational manipulation, the meanings of which have become more or less dependably stabilized through his participation in a social and linguistic community; second, a set of "rules of the game" for their combination, implicit versions of what the logicians once liked to call the "laws of thought," a syntax of thought as well as of language; third, the ability by shifting perspective to attain a degree of objectivity toward one's own behavior and mental operations; and fourth, by slight extension, the ability to check the results of one's symbolic processes by "consensual validation" or its internalized equivalent. Rational thought becomes understandable as a kind of inner dialogue, an inherently social process.

Rationality versus irrationality in human development. For this schematic and elementary account to become relevant to my theme, however, I must broaden the context to rough in a few other features of what seems to me to be a plausible eclectic view of the way rationality develops. We can probably agree that the baby who is to acquire rationality and selfhood in interaction with those representatives of the socio-cultural *status quo*, his parents, starts out utterly non-rational, a creature of urges, lacks, and unexamined immediacies, much as the psychoanalysts suppose him to be. Let us grant him developing sensory and motor capacities, and satisfactions in putting them to use. Let us further assume that from early in his life, if not from the beginning, he tries to put his experience in some sort of order. Next comes a moot point: What assumptions shall we make about his intellectual curiosity or laziness? If we can count on curiosity, it will provide an intrinsic push to expand his horizons as he gains access to new ranges of information. But laziness, a principle of least mental effort, seems to be part of the picture, too, as Gardner Murphy (10) has pointed out. Perhaps the best we can do here is to equivocate: The laziness that favors simplicity and sameness over complexity and change in one's cognitive structures, as long as one can get away with it, seems real enough; whether or not curiosity also develops may depend on a variety of factors, probably social ones. We leave unresolved how these opposed but not necessarily contradictory tendencies may interact.

With the achievement of language and the complicated symbolic and social processes that it makes possible, the developing creature is now a person. But symbolic complexity, necessary condition for rationality that it is, also lays the foundation for irrationality. Already he is subject to stresses that disturb the still quite unstable equilibrium that he has been able to achieve, and exceed his powers of problem-solving, uncertainly augmented as they are by his new symbolic equipment. Parental demands to put off the gratifications of being a small animal for the measured satisfactions of civilized restraint; parental disapproval itself internalized and thus a threat to the weak and incipient self; sensed weakness before the assaults of inner and of outer stimulation—all these are sources of the universal phenomena of conflict, anxiety, shame, and guilt. Meanwhile the same, distinctively human symbolic equipment that he has now available for use in problem-solving can be turned to evading problems that threaten to overwhelm him, or to making them more supportable without solving them. Soon he begins to learn the many all-too-human ways of manipulating himself symbolically when threats are too great or too obscure for realistic coping; the loss of innocence that comes with reflective awareness makes possible the insidious comforts of dissimulation to the self as well as to others. The possibilities of neurotic irrationality and of rational problem-solving thus lie on opposite sides of the same symbolic coin.

Factors promoting rationality versus irrationality. We may now ask, what are the factors that may tip the balance toward rationality, what toward evasiveness? The clinical lore on which I am drawing is quite explicit about determinants of irrationality. Among them, it tells us that irrationality proliferates when the challenge to a person's adaptation is too severe, or too obscure, to be met head-on with the resources then at his command, or when it engages residues in his personality structure accrued from previous evasive reactions to equivalent challenges. Irrationality arises by default in the absence of sufficient frustration tolerance and of the requisite knowledge and skill; it may be positively encouraged by example and reward.

As for rationality, the "clinical" lore is less explicit, but suggestions are at hand which go beyond mere negation of the unfavorable determinants that we have just considered. For one, there is the discipline of experience with the world of things, and here I would include factual encounter with the functional properties of other people as well as with those of the inanimate world, as these condition the success of a per-

son's instrumental efforts. As long as experience can be kept a gentle rather than a severe taskmaster by the appropriate scheduling of developmental tasks, instrumental encounter with thing and fact keeps autism in check and may goad even the lazy intellect to revising assumptions and expanding the environmental context within which behavior is oriented. As a determinant of rationality, *thing-encounter* is not specifically social, although it may be socially "programmed" and facilitated.

A second factor promoting rationality, opportunity for the *social validation* of the steps and outcomes of one's symbolic processes, follows directly from our standard account of the interactive genesis of complex symbolic thought. Continual opportunity to test one's assumptions and expectations in social interaction keeps one's "generalized other," as Mead might put it, under constant revision, and like thing-encounter, also serves to control autistic tendencies that unless somehow counteracted would gradually warp one's thinking with respect to his private wishes and fears.

Social or consensual validation has of course been emphasized particularly by Sullivan (14) and his school of psychiatry, on the one hand, and more recently by Festinger (7), on the other. One can hardly exaggerate its importance, yet as a determinant of rationality, it is equivocal in some respects. The trouble is that the interactive checking that corrects unwarranted idiosyncrasy (and therefore plays such a major role in psychotherapy) does no good when autisms are common to a social group, or when culturally provided information happens to be wrong. And our studies of culture and personality give us good reason for expecting the shared autism to be a frequent phenomenon, not a rarity. Insufficiently dependable by itself, social validation needs to be checked and supplemented. Direct thing-encounter, when there is opportunity for it, provides one such corrective. But the symbolic world of modern man extends far beyond the rather limited range in which it is sufficiently feasible to be of much help. Still a third factor in rationality thus becomes of crucial importance.

This is the body of socially transmitted "rules of the game" for effective thinking and problem solving, and the values associated with their use, that I will call for convenience *"rational culture"*—"know-how" and "think-how" if you will. At a rudimentary level, this begins with the implicit rules of logic and syntax that, as our model has it, the young child acquires with his first skills in communicative interaction. It goes on to include the full range of skills and aids for coping with

reality that his culture makes available without his having to discover or invent them afresh.

Historical cultures have differed enormously in their constructive and critical resources for bolstering rationality. And among them, contemporary industrial civilization is unique in the actual and potential power of its rational culture. The point has been put eloquently in recent essays by Bronowski (2) and by Murphy (10), and I can only rephrase it briefly to fit the present context. The message is an important one for the problem that we started with.

The point, of course, is that the dynamic factor, and the amazing novelty, in our contemporary culture is *science*, as a rational program for discovery, a cumulative social endeavor, a "habit of truth," a way of life with its own values that have emerged from the inescapable conditions of its practice. As a rational subculture without precedent, it gives new meaning to the concept of rationality, and warrants new aspirations for what man may make of himself.

The trouble is, science is a *sub*culture. The values that go with its technological products have diffused far more widely than its own values and thought-ways. Indeed, it is the former that are undoubtedly responsible for the ineluctable spread throughout the world of the urban industrial complex—as well as for the critical urgency of our current dilemmas. What we most urgently need, implies Bronowski, is more general diffusion of the values and of the spirit of science (which he sees as essentially those of responsible democracy); where as psychologists and behavioral scientists our challenge and our hope lie, says Murphy, is in marshalling our immense powers of discovery and invention to release new dimensions of human potentiality.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of a social psychological perspective on rationality, we began with the liberal's implicit faith in the basic reasonableness of human nature, which, as it seemed, has been rather badly undermined. We then took a look at some of the principal currents in general psychological theory, asking what they had to say about rationality. On the whole, our review yielded little to support a faith in rationality—rather to the contrary—while it also raised some doubts about the adequacy of the theories to deal sensibly with the question that we put to them. We turned then to social psychology, and found that according to the frame of reference that is emerging as predominant, rationality is a social achievement, not a given, and rational thought

a social process. Examining the roots of rational problem-solving in the context of the rather jerry-built model of human development that embodies my present convictions, we came to the paradox that if rationality is a social product, so is irrationality; both depend on manipulations of the symbolic equipment, cultural in content and social in genesis, that is distinctive of mankind. Here, I think, we have managed to clear away some of the confusion occasioned by an unwarranted *faith* in human rationality, and set the stage for a more *rational* examination of the conditions under which rational or irrational dispositions are likely to develop and become manifest.

Embarking speculatively on such an examination, we tried to itemize some of these conditions, possible determinants of rationality and irrationality that, once explicitly recognized, can give us reason to hope that higher levels of rationality may be socially attainable. Among these, we singled out for special attention what we called "rational culture," of which the values and thought-ways of modern science are a unique and portentous variant.

Our psychological tour can hardly be said to warrant optimism. Technology may outdistance science, and blow us up; irrationality may get ahead of rationality. No unseen hand has necessarily stacked the cards in our favor. Perhaps, however, the perspective we have attained may embolden us to stick by our values in a spirit of adventure and rational determination. We need not faith, which is vulnerable, but resourcefulness, courage, and determination.

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