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This Is America

Irrationality Is Ineradicable

Human beings have not and cannot eradicate irrationality.

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Centuries ago, the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz declared that human beings could – and should – make the right inferences from known facts, act accordingly, and thereby end all conflicts, from family squabbles to wars between nations.

They did not – and cannot. As Justin Smith, a professor of history and philosophy of science at the University of Paris 7, and the author of The Philosopher: A History in Six Types, demonstrates in an immensely informative and provocative new book, irrationality is ineradicable. For individuals, irrationality manifests itself in emotion, passion, desire, and dreams; in society it is expressed in religion, myths, conspiracy theories, riots, and mass demonstrations. These days, Smith points out, irrationality spreads like wildfire through social media.
Our understanding of the “magisterium of logic,” Smith suggests, is complicated by uncertainty as to whether reason should be defined by what we think or what we do (that may or may not be “caused” by what we think). If the latter, then animals, lacking higher cognition, can only be rational – and “what makes human beings unique is our irrationality.” Smith wonders as well whether Artificial Intelligence machines will “consciously deliberate about what they are doing,” and, in time, develop the power to act on an “entirely arbitrary whim.”

For good and ill, Smith emphasizes, dreams, fictions, fantasies, poetry, music, visual art, and political dissent “take us to other worlds, to other possibilities,” while reason often tells us that there is only one world. Censors, he writes, are not wrong in believing that fictional worlds can seep into reality and alter it. More generally, Smith reminds us that nation-states are nothing more or less than “imagined communities,” held together by “events that happened in a timeless, undocumented, mythical past” as well as “real, historical truths.” And that idiosyncrasy and inspiration, which reason cannot explain, produce “results we recognize as valuable.”

Smith reveals as well that assessments of self-interest and existential choices are not always produced by a rational calculations of expected outcomes. Consider, for example, the decision to have children. An older person’s offer to give way to a child when there are limited spaces on a lifeboat. Or a younger person’s enlistment in the army to fight a distant war. These manifestations of irrationality, Smith agrees, exist beyond good and evil: “Life would be unlivable if they were suppressed entirely.” In many respects, he adds, “every response to the specter of immortality,” including decisions to smoke cigarettes or climb Yosemite’s El Capitan slope without ropes, “can be criticized for its irrationality.”

Of course, Smith also documents the damage caused by irrationality. Intent on reconciling faith with reason, he claims, creationists seem to assume that “assent to the truth of Christianity hangs on such matters as whether dinosaurs can be shown to have lived contemporaneously with human beings.” Occupying a position closer to flat-earthers than anti-Darwinists, the anti-vaccination activists, Smith asserts, appear to be motivated less by weighing evidence than by “wariness of elite authority.”

At times, Smith’s rhetoric is apocalyptic. He deems opponents of President Obama’s Affordable Care Act “delusional romantics.” Instead of strengthening democracy by facilitating “collective decision making” based on reason,” he writes, the Internet seems now “to be playing a central role in the rapid decline of that aspiration.” Indeed, this may be akin to the moment when “after just having seized a lightning-struck branch and used it to keep warm for a night, an entire hominid encampment was burned down to ash.” In our post-fact, fake news era, Smith insists, we are
becoming inured to politicians, pundits, and conspiracy-mongers who “make up the flimsiest lies,” pretending that they believe them, “a ratcheting up of irrationalism to levels unprecedented in recent era.”

What, then, is to be done? Irrationality, Smith repeats, “is in itself neither left nor right, nor good nor bad.” It is irrational to try to eliminate irrationality, “both in society and in our own exercise of our mental facilities.”

Why, then, one wonders, does he end his book by telling us that he has quit drinking, bought a Fitbit, closed his Facebook account, got his finances in order, and “got rational in my limited and rational way”? What does he mean when he declares that “true self-help” lies in “thoroughly working through everything that is good, everything we love, in what we also hate and wish to be free of: all the delirium and delusion, the enthusiasms, the excesses, manias, mythmaking rhapsodies, stubbornness, and self-subversion that make human life, for good and ill, what it is”?

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