

Rationality, by Ron Benbow

This society seems to be on a course to self-destruction, due largely to false or misleading beliefs, distrust, and miscommunication. Concepts play a crucial role in how we think and how we communicate. My goal here is to discuss some concepts used in connection with rationality. If we do not have "effective" concepts, and share compatible concepts; or if we are unable to resolve conflicting meanings, then many problems go unresolved.

A society of this complexity must have a populace that is sufficiently rational to function effectively and to facilitate the development of its citizens. The essence of rationality is the ability to think clearly, obtain accurate knowledge and to act effectively to resolve our "problems." A problem is something which a person is motivated to resolve, understand, or avoid. "Motivation" requires that an individual feel a need or anticipate a need of some kind. Motivation is a combination of internally based needs and knowledge (perceptions) gained by interacting with the environment.

Knowledge is the individual's understanding of his/her needs, and how the physical environment works. Knowledge includes predicting the behavior of others and their expectations. Accurate knowledge allows us to predict or manipulate aspects of our environment for our own benefit. Understanding how things work requires an assumption of "natural" cause-effect; or determinism. It is a basic assumption of science that all events (effects) have a cause; and this assumption is why the scientific method has enabled humanity to build a reliable fund of knowledge. There remains much to be understood, but if we assume something cannot be explained, except by supernatural forces, then there is no point in studying them.

We each evaluate the problem solving behaviors of others and judge whether they are "rational" or not. This tendency to judge others is natural but it is where discussions and judgments about rationality can become conflicted. We each judge the behavior of others according to our own knowledge and experience; but we also use standards and concepts that we have learned from others. This results in some "relativity" of judgment, but if a problem is accurately conceived and rationally discussed, differences can usually be resolved or compromises reached.

Our culture teaches us that people have free-will (choices) in how they act; but the concept of free-will is inconsistent with the assumption of determinism. Consciousness is not yet fully understood but it seems clear that there is no need for a soul. It seems to us that we make choices; but I think that is an illusion that is in part created by the concepts we use and the self-referencing capabilities in language.

If all of our actions are the result of cause and effect; then, the concept of free-will has no relevance. This means that rationality is not a choice, it is the result of learning that some behavior is more rewarding than others. When a new problem arises which has similarities to prior experience, the memory and skills learned are automatically recalled and evaluated for relevance. Obviously there are many differences in individual needs, experiences, and even learning and processing capabilities. Even individuals having

similar experiences may react differently because of different emotional thresholds or different "priorities."

I think consciousness is the result of specialized circuits in the brain that allow for the processing of information that is unique in some way that the individual has not fully experienced or understood previously. Consciousness is primarily the activation of a nerve system in the brain that increases attention to some of the many variables in the individual's current circumstances. Consciousness is limited by available energy, health, prior experience, and many other factors.

Many disagreements about what is rational are based on beliefs about what constitutes reliable knowledge. Perhaps more important are the unquestioned assumptions and values about what actions will be beneficial for the individual and/or the group they belong to. There is a serious defect in our culture which discourages the questioning of beliefs and values (especially those related to politics and religion). Society's current political gridlock is based on different values and unquestioned beliefs.

God, faith and free-will are some of the concepts that are interfering with rational problem solving and communication. There are many other beliefs that need to be rationally discussed. For example, beliefs about human nature, survival of the fittest, and the need to adopt some ideology or set of ethics, tend to create exploitation, distrust and conflict.

It will be difficult to resolve our political gridlock unless values and beliefs are openly questioned and analyzed within a rational framework. In other words, people need to realize that questioning their beliefs and values is essential to resolving the problem of political gridlock and their personal relationships. Instead of thinking of values as personal opinions that are immune from questioning, I think values should be looked at as beliefs about what object/act/circumstance will most likely result in some benefit for the individual (or group). As such, beliefs and values would be hypotheses which can be analyzed, and then tested in some context to be verified or disproved.

In other words, it is time to bring the scientific method into a study of beliefs and values that effect our actions. It is already happening, for example environmental impact studies; but human relationships in general should also be subject to scientific analysis.

For example, the pursuit of self-interest seems compatible with what is usually thought of as moral behavior. Competition is inevitable, and enforced rules are in the self-interest of competitors. Improving the concepts and understanding of how to communicate and build mutually beneficial relationships would go far in improving society in general. I think that scientific research to demonstrate the benefits of effective communication and more rational relationships is desperately needed -- if we are to avoid the potential societal decline.