

Reason and Irrationality – Is it reasonable to expect people to be rational?

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, March 5, 2006
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Is it reasonable to expect people to be rational? Let me answer that right up front for those of you who are pressed for time, or who have short attention spans, or just can't stand the tension a moment longer and are on the edge of your seats waiting for a yes-or-no illumination.

Well, I have something better than yes or no – yes and no. Is it reasonable to expect people to be rational? Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

What, you really thought I was going to wrap it all up in the opening paragraph? It's not that easy.

We're all reasonable people, here, right? Are there any here present who consider themselves unreasonable? Or irrational? No, of course not. But we all have our moments of unreasonableness, don't we?

When we encounter the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, or for some other reason overreact—dare I say it?—unreasonably. Or when, in exasperation, we exclaim, “don't confuse me with the facts!”

And many of us have irrational aspects as well—fears, for example, even phobias. Mine's the dentist. No, no, not for the regular, some would say rational reasons. And it doesn't keep me from my regular visits. My particular irrationality is that I just know the needle's going to break off in my mouth. I close my eyes and any dentist I've been to more than once knows not to let me see the needle first. Once the injection is behind me, I'm fine. But during it, I wait for the snap.

I once had a well-intentioned dentist actually tie a thin needle in a knot right before my very eyes to demonstrate just how unbreakable they are—and just how irrational I am. It didn't assuage my fear one bit, and I learned right then and there that reason seldom conquers irrationality.

After all, if reason applied we wouldn't harbor these little irrationalities in the first place. And people resent the attempt to reason them out of positions they didn't come to through reason in the first place. For example, I never went back to that knot-tying dentist.

Now, I'm not going to ask you all to stand and bear witness to your irrationalities. Either none of you would own up or we'd be here all day. But let me give some common examples of irrationality that may resonate with you.

Common fears that are not full-blown phobias but that go past reasonable caution: Confined spaces, a discomfort in, say, elevators. Not enough to drive you to the stairs, but enough that you're aware of it every time you step into one and have to steel yourself for the challenge.

Heights, like when you step out on a balcony? Flying? Or how about a fear of creepy crawly things: Spiders and bugs.

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

The point is this; we all have our irrationalities and moments when reason abandons us—individually and collectively. So, proceeding in a reasonable, logical fashion, it's unreasonable to expect everyone to be rational all the time.

On the other hand, it is reasonable to expect people to be rational most of the time, and certainly within certain contexts. In fact, our very lives depend on it constantly. It's reasonable to expect people to operate motor vehicles in a rational, predictable manner—stopping at stop signals, not driving on the sidewalks. And when they don't, people can die. It's reasonable to expect that health care professionals possess the skills and ethics implied by their profession. When they don't, people can die.

I could go on but I think you get the picture. This is clearly a contextual question. Yes, it is reasonable to expect people to be rational in most all situations, but it is irrational to expect them to be reasonable in all situations.

We're riddled, each of us, with irrationalities both large and small. And if there's one irrationality that defines our culture today it is a fear of death so great that it compels us to deny it. Not deny the fear, though we do, but deny death itself. Deny it and erect complex mythologies in defense of our denial. Many mitigate what can be a paralyzing fear of death with the embrace of a hereafter, contending that death is not death at all, or at least not final.

I confess to sharing Shakespeare's puzzlement over the extent of this:

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

That quote, from Julius Caesar begins, "Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once." I don't mean to intimate that those who embrace the promise of a hereafter are cowards. Indeed many face the prospect stoically and reasonably.

Like the line in the country song—I know some of you like it better when I cite Shakespeare or Camus, which I'm about to, but I happen to think some of the best contemporary philosophy comes not in the pages of dense tomes but on the tracks of country CDs. Easily understood statements like this—"I wanna go to heaven, but I don't wanna go tonight." Now, say what you will about the belief in heaven, but who among us would quibble with not being in any hurry to get there—were it there.

So I'm not saying belief in a hereafter is cravenly, but I am saying it takes a certain amount of courage to reject that stance and to accept this life as all and enough. Even most of those who cling to a belief in the hereafter cling even more tenaciously to this life and are in no hurry to leave it behind.

Paraphrasing Camus; We stand, face to face with the irrational and feel within us the often conflicting longings for both comfort and reason. One of the benefits of irrationality is that you can keep telling yourself all manner of fanciful, comforting things and cheer yourself up by believing them. It's like being stoned on delusions of happiness. Not a bad state, but not rational and not very fulfilling.

In preparing my talk for this morning, I drew heavily from the work of social critic Wendy Kaminer, especially her book *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials*, subtitled, *The Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety*. The dust jacket explains that in it Wendy

“argues that we are a society intoxicated by the irrational: religion, spirituality,” and she uses those words in the normative sense, not as we might use them here—but that’s my topic two weeks from today, *Religion and Spirituality—What’s in a Word*— “religion, spirituality,” the dust jacket continues, “and popular therapies threaten to replace rational thought with supernaturalism and impassioned but unexamined personal testimony.”

The book was published in 1999. Since then we’ve had all too much evidence that Wendy was and is on the right track. Our culture is in danger of being engulfed by the beliefs of those who have no better foundation or justification for them other than that they believe them—their own impassioned but unexamined and unexplained testimony.”

Wendy draws what I consider proper boundaries in maintaining that irrationality is harmless so long as it remains within realms that don’t require reason. And that’s my focus this morning: The boundaries of expectation when it comes to reason and rationality; when it’s reasonable to expect people to be rational, when it’s sensible to rely on them being so, and when it’s justifiable to demand that they be so.

Reason is the capacity for logical, rational, and analytic thought—sound judgment, good sense. And something is considered rational when it is consistent with or based on reason—when it’s logical. To accept something as rational is to accept it as making sense, as appropriate or required, or in accord with some acknowledged goal—such as aiming at truth or at the good.

Or, as skeptic Michael Shermer phrases it, the boundary between reason and irrationality is where sense meets nonsense.

Any process of drawing conclusions from a set of premises may be called a process of reasoning. But it can be deemed reasonable only to the extent that the set of premises you begin with are themselves considered reasonable. You can start with utter nonsense and proceed quite reasonably from there. That doesn’t render the whole process rational but rather brings us back to Wendy’s unexplained or unsupported beliefs, or *a priori* “knowledge”—*knowledge* in quotes.

A proposition is “knowable”—again in quotes—knowable *a priori* if it can be “known” without experience in the actual world. This is at odds with a Humanist epistemology that contends that knowledge is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.

A priori propositions are highly controversial philosophically and viewed with skepticism as it is not at all clear how pure thought, unaided by experience, can give rise to any knowledge at all. But today we’re all too often faced with those impassioned but unexplained testimonies that can be dizzyingly circular and give rationality whiplash—I believe it because it’s true and it’s true because I believe it. Say it often enough and loud enough and it becomes “fact,” whether it makes sense or not.

Our sense of what’s reasonable, like other sensibilities, changes, progresses. For who knows how long there was the “reasonable man” legal test that only recently became the “reasonable person” standard. The joke is that it took that long to find a reasonable woman. This is Women’s History Month so we are especially mindful that reason knows no gender or class or ethnicity, or even religious conviction. But there’s a huge segment in our culture that feels reason should be suspended when it comes to that last one—religious conviction, which most recognize as the largest repository of irrational belief today.

Next week, Joe Chuman, the longtime leader of the Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, New Jersey, will be speaking on *Should Religion Be Immune From Criticism?* Those who understand religion in general and Ethical Culture in particular as well as Joe number in single digits, so I'll leave that field to him with my encouragement that you come and hear what he has to say.

But I will answer his question on my own behalf: No, no exemption, no free pass. In fact I'll go a step further and say that we have an ethical obligation to doubt, to question, and to criticize wherever we find reason to do so. And irrationality masquerading as reason is certainly cause for examination and critique.

You know, we have a self-defeating tendency toward tolerance that often leaves us without proper boundaries and renders us hesitant to engage the views of others whom we respect but with whose positions we differ or even consider irrational. This is a liberal failing Robert Frost commented on in saying, "A liberal is a man too broadminded to take his own side in a quarrel."

Irrationality abounds in our culture in areas other than religion. The entire sports enterprise is supported by the unreasoned, and sometimes unbounded, enthusiasm of "fans," short for fanatics. Pop "therapy" crazes come and go as the gullible weary of bilking the more gullible. Fashionable gurus fade almost as fast as diet fads. We've had at least one First Lady try to influence the actions of her husband based on the alignment of the stars, and a cult-hero escape artist, Houdini, whose greatest attempted feat was to escape the finality of death by promising to speak to us from beyond the pale. And that's just a short list.

So with that rich field to choose from, why pick on religion? Why single out the exalted? Because when the irrationality of religion gets out of hand, when taken to its extremes as it increasingly is today, liberties are infringed, justice skewed, and people can die.

Religion, and here I, too, speak of normative religion, or religion as that term is normally understood, is based on a leap of faith and faith, by definition, is not based in reason.

The late mythologist Joseph Campbell once observed, "Why should it be that whenever [we] have looked for something solid upon which to found [our] lives, [we] have chosen not the facts in which the world abounds, but the myths of an immemorial imagination?" Fancy is a poor substitute for fact and ought not be allowed to stand as such in the public realm.

This from Wendy Kaminer: "A rational society is one that values argument and considers virtually all points of view subject to debate. It promotes inquiry, experimentation, and empiricism. The search for evidence is not a search for indisputable proof. Rationalism is founded on skepticism—a commitment to testing all beliefs, including your own—and a capacity to tolerate doubt."

It would follow that an irrational society refuse to accept any opposition and considers itself sacrosanct. It embraces the status quo with a fanatic fervor, eschews all evidence at odds with its biases, favors subjectivity over objectivity, and displays a certainty that eclipses any semblance of doubt.

Whew, that's harsh! But, I think, fair. Which do you think better describes our society today?

Wendy goes on, “Rationalism requires control of the emotions and temperamental biases that help shape belief, but not elimination of them: you take your convictions seriously, and act on them as if they were true. But you acknowledge the possibility of being wrong.” Now that last one, the possibility of being wrong, is problematic to the irrational society or the sectarian mind, which is incapable of allowing any such possibility and intolerant of even the mildest forms of dissent.

Most of us don’t buy into the absolutist stance of today’s political and religious fundamentalists. We’re all too eager to criticize the former, the political, but all too timid in our consideration of the latter, the religious. Courage often fails us in confronting religious irrationality.

Humanity’s struggle has largely been to explain ourselves and our environment. We’ve been wildly successful overall, but our progress has been jerky, and suffered a terrible, centuries-long setback during what’s referred to as the dark ages.

I mention this because after sustained scientific and social progress that has brought us to an apex atop the efforts of all who have come before us, something is going terribly wrong—and for much the same reasons as it did fifteen hundred years ago—the unquenched thirst for ownership of absolute truth and the consequent exercise of absolute power.

Progressives, those of us who believe in a better world through our own efforts, exist at the leading edge of the known, or, viewed from the opposite perspective, the frontier of the unknown. We’re always reaching forward. We understand that everything we try offers the fulfillment of hope on the one side, but abuts error on the other.

In our quest for progress, for a better world, we’ve shrugged off the urge for absolutes. Even as we hold up the aim of perfection as our ideal, we are continually aware that it is possible we may be mistaken in our own constructs, as reasonable and rational as they may seem. We accept them as true but we don’t stop examining, questioning, and improving them. That’s part and parcel of progress, of human advancement.

I’m reminded of an exchange between George and Martha in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf*. Martha: Truth and illusion, George; you don’t know the difference. George: No; but we must carry on as though we did. And so we do.

Behavioral scientist Frank Sulloway, in writing in *Born to Rebel* in 1996, said “Individuals who launch radical revolutions typically require determination, courage, and independence of mind.” Those were certainly attributes of the founder of Ethical Culture, Felix Adler, along with an astounding intelligence and thirst for knowledge, even if he thought of himself more as a reformer than a rebel.

One hundred years after the founding of our nation, itself a great experiment in equality and democracy and the separation of sense and nonsense, Adler began his own great experiment that rests largely on the same principles. By setting aside questions of origin and destiny, Ethical Culture takes the stance that there’s no harm in irrationality so long as it remains within confines that don’t require reason.

So, while it may not be reasonable to expect people to be rational when pondering questions outside the bounds of our current knowledge, it is reasonable to expect them to be rational when considering those that are. It is reasonable to recognize that opinions, no matter how fervently held, are not facts. It is not the mission of reason to conquer or squelch irrationality but rather to confine it within harmless boundaries.

We of course want to be respectful, but we must not stand down in the face of irrationality. We respect the right of others to hold rational views at odds with our own, and work to protect their right to hold irrational views—the right to hold them but not to impose them

This distinction, this separation enshrined in our constitution as the separation of church and state, does not call for restricting comment from religious people and organizations concerning public affairs, and does not desire, much less demand, the expulsion of religious practice from public life.

The right of all people, whatever their motivation or aim, to take part in public debate is a right a government and its citizens are bound to accommodate, but no one is bound to lend partisan support to views other than their own.

Sectarian interests who wish to influence public policy and secular law have a civic obligation, and perhaps in their own estimation a holy mandate, to do so. But they also have a constitutional obligation to do so by appealing to shared nonsectarian ideals rather than through the imposition of their own ideology. That is not asking for tolerance of their beliefs, that is asking for submission to them.

The trend toward a rational society upsets religious fundamentalists. The root of their rage is to be found in the advancements of science, the progress of Ethical Humanism, and the enlightenment of governance. What fans the flame of their irrationality is that none of these embrace their particular sectarian stance, and that each firmly rejects supernatural interpretations of reality and vigorously opposes them as the basis for civil or criminal law or the establishment of social mores. In other words, reason has risen to challenge irrationality, and that's more than disquieting to more than a few.

If irrationality is to be held at bay, we must each take a stand against it. Let it be known that you stand against those who ask for submission and with those who wish to empower. Tell others that you stand against those who demand surrender and with those who promote freedom. Let friends and acquaintances know that you stand against those who wish to impose irrational views on a rational society and with those who defend a secular government.

We Ethical Humanists live without the need of irrational constructs to explain our existence or dictate how we ought to behave. And we stand in strong opposition to those who would impose such constructs through force, coercion, or any means other than reason.

Ethical living requires the courage to look the world square in the face and not turn away, indeed to stand up and face it openly. We Ethical Culturists find the abundant facts of life, our ever-expanding understanding of ourselves and knowledge of the universe of which we are a part very solid ground upon which to rest our lives.

It is reasonable to expect people to be rational in the public arena. It is reasonable to expect that views at odds with rational insights be confined to the private realm. It is reasonable to expect that the social emphasis be on the practice of life rather than the adoption of unsupported belief.

These are things Ethical Culture stands for, and that our world has tilted against. Which will prevail? Will the enlightenment continue to brighten, or will we return to the gloom of the dark ages? Reason or irrationality?

Not every great experiment succeeds. Not every noble thought prevails. And whether or not ours—started 130 years ago with great courage, sustained along the way with great determination, and marked by an independence of mind—whether or not Ethical Culture reaches full realization is now up to us. If we're successful, freedom will be secure, justice will prevail, and reason will overcome irrationality.



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