Rational thinking

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Humans have the capability to think and reason. When we think rationally, we analyze past experiences, explore possibilities, evaluate evidence, and make facts-driven conclusions. But how often do we pull the entire process through? A lot of the time, we shortcut the process and call fast-thinking rational-thinking.

> Rational thinking is a skill that requires learning and practice like all other skills. The more you practice, the better you get at it.

Consider swimming for example. You learn swimming in shallow waters before jumping into deep waters. Second, you cannot shortcut the swimming process. There are four phases in a freestyle swimming stroke: 1) catch, 2) pull, 3) exit, and 4) recovery. You swim only by completing all four phases. Third, you cannot swim half-way to the middle of the river and assume you are done for the day.

Learning never ends

When children do not understand anything, they observe others and ask questions. Asking right questions is the first step towards understanding anything and adults teach children to formulate the questions before answering. As we grow older, we pose questions (to ourselves), find answers, and update our understanding.

For example, we update our beliefs in the light of new facts and evidence. No one now believes that magic, spirit, devil, or an angel carries the sound of a person from one part of the planet to the other when talking over a phone.

> Learning does not stop at any level … It is a life-long journey.

Solving the hard questions, the wrong way

Some questions are hard to answer. We replace them with questions that are quicker to answer. For example, if you win or lose in a match, you may replace the question, ‘What were the reasons you won or lost?’ with ‘Is God kind or unkind to you?’ Such fast-thinking hacks, in many cases, make our reasoning unsound and our understanding of the world inconsistent.

For example, we may develop a faith-based understanding of the world that is inconsistent with reality. This happens when we are unwilling to let go of false beliefs or frivolous ideas that are dear to us. The differences between the two generate conflicting models of the future in our predictive brain. We rush to resolve the uneasiness and fear generated by ambivalence in the future (outcome).

Since we cannot change the physical laws, nor do we want to let our faith go, we box our beliefs in a separate mental chambers. We do not let any fact or evidence infiltrate these chambers that can invalidate our beliefs.

> Our brain does not like inconsistent views of the world based on faith versus facts. To resolve the conflict, we compartmentalize our brain. We restrict, re-interpret, or even twist the evidence in mental chambers that guard our faith.

Thinking is neither cheap nor easy

Thinking is an exhaustive activity that consumes energy. The process of thinking demands your focus and time. Fact-finding activities, necessary for making an informed decision, require money and resources. As some of the resources are limited and hard to acquire, the job of rational thinking becomes riddled with hurdles.

Hurdles pave the way for a fast-thinking brain. Fast thinking brain does not waste time on deep analysis. Instead, it jumps to a conclusion in minimal time to save energy and resources. It does so based on partial data, quickly available from recent experiences, repeated memories, our likenesses and dislikes, etc.

If a decision leads to immediate gains, a strong feedback loop becomes an incentive for further fast thinking. Losses may also give you an incentive for fast thinking to save whatever you can: time, energy and resources used on rational thinking that can potentially lead to the same outcome.

Ultimately, our brain goes fully into an autopilot mode, where fast-thinking takes the driving seat of our reasoning. For example, we follow rituals because it is the most convenient thing to do that requires no thinking at all. A fast-thinking brain does not have the capacity or courage to challenge the sanity of an entire group, including our loved ones who follow the same rituals. The probability of them all going wrong is extremely low if not zero.

- "How can they all be so irrational when it comes to faith while they are reasonable in other worldly affairs? In addition, if the rituals have been in practice for so many centuries, previous generations must have already vetted those beliefs, right?"

Once an action has already been taken, it is not worth looking at reasons that could make us look irrational. We ignore the facts that prove us wrong and search for information that supports our actions. Over time, the accumulated (but partial) knowledge in our favor makes our faith stronger.

Some politicians and regimes take advantage of this human weakness. They make false claims and then keep rehashing time and again. When repeated enough times, people start believing in the plausibility of the claim. Instead of asking for proof of the claim, rejectors of the false claim are asked to prove their case.

> Fast thinking optimizes energy, time, and resources. Once you believe in a false claim, your brain creates a separate mental box for the claims made by the person you just believed in. You accept all those claims to be (at least somewhat) true and pass the burden of proof on to the ones who deny the claims.

In addition, humans are social animals who assign very high value to activities that generate a sense of belonging. We feel a sense of belonging to a group when we follow the unique social and religious activities that define the group. Without group identity, we feel lonely and abandoned.

Where does the fear of abandonment come from? In ancient times, a lonely and fragile human was no match for wild animals or hostile groups. Sense of belonging kept humans together and alive.

We may have killed all the wild animals and created punishment laws for hurting other humans, but the desire for belonging still lingers on strongly deep within us. Belonging to a group is not a bad idea, but we sacrifice our own identity and behave like a herd.

Conclusion

Rationality is not about finding justification for our beliefs and actions. Rather, it is about finding truth. Desires should be kept aside, and unbiased evidence should be analyzed as objectively as humanly possible. Assumption should not be made a priori, and facts should not be ignored based on our liking or disliking. We must be ready, in all honesty, to accept the reason-based decision even if we do not like it.

The good news is that we can change at any time no matter how hard our habits might have become. Just like we have trained ourselves to act on fast thinking, we can gradually train ourselves to engage in rational thinking. The more you use your reasoning faculties, the more efficient you become at using it.