Social Stupidity: The Social Sources of Irrationality

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Abstract

Social scientists have long been divided in assessing the status of irrationality. Some have found it universal; others have found it diminishing. Most have regarded it as objectionable. In fact, irrationality seems to be both inevitable, and, to some degree, functional. It apparently helps to maintain social integrity, while permitting adjustments to unforeseen circumstances. Both cultural and structural processes are implicated in attenuating procedural rationality. Cognitive communities, moral communities, social hierarchies, divisions of labor and personal relationships all induce individuals and groups to ignore easily accessible facts and logic. In this, emotional, as well as social negotiation, phenomena prevent people from making exact calculations regarding instrumental or cognitive truths.
Social Stupidity: The Social Sources of Irrationality

Most people see themselves living on an island of intelligence in a sea of idiocy. (David Brooks, On Paradise Drive)

Irrationality in Historical Perspective

Rational choice theorists notwithstanding (Coleman, 1990), most people (including most sociologists) recognize that other human beings frequently behave in an irrational manner (Kick, 2002). They agree with David Brooks (2000) in perceiving others, but not themselves, as exemplars of foolishness. Indeed, the subject of irrationality has been a favorite among academics and essayists for generations. Most of these explorations have been psychological or economic in nature, but sociology too has much to contribute to this discourse.

Perhaps the best-known approach to the subject is that of Sigmund Freud (1953-1974). He believed that human beings are hostage to unconscious forces. Impulses arising from their instincts, in his terminology, from the Id, influenced both their perceptions and their judgments. Instead of dealing with the world the way it is, deeply buried desires compelled them to seek sexualized pleasures while simultaneously distorting their awareness of what they were doing. Likewise, psychological defenses, such as repression, projection, and rationalization, prevented an accurate assessment of that which might be anxiety provoking. Rather than logically evaluate their circumstances, they reacted as might frightened and selfish children.

In recent years, cognitive psychologists have made enormous advances in understanding how the human brain operates. As lately summarized in the works of David Goleman (2006), observations made on living human craniums have demonstrated a partition between emotional and cognitive systems. Utilizing tools such as PET scans and MRIs, they have been able to disentangle the operations of the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. These emotional and intellectual circuits apparently operate on
separate tracks that do not always jibe. As such, it is possible for an individual to respond emotively to a stimulus without calmly assessing its origin.

Among economists, the work of Herbert Simon (1947) remains extremely influential. His observation that business decision-makers do not typically possess all the information needed to arrive at optimal choices continues to command respect. Unaware of all relevant facts, or of their long-term consequences, or even of their own value priorities, the best they can do is “satisfice.” When called upon to exercise discretion, they approximate rationality the best they can, but with the realization that they may be wrong. In other words, they settle on satisfactory answers rather than fully rational ones.

Sociologists too have contributed to this discussion. Most salient among these inputs have been those of Max Weber (Gerth and Mills, 1946). His assertion that the dominance of market-based societies is grounded in their growing rationality is widely esteemed. His studies of bureaucracy have, in particular, become iconic. These assert that both the role structure and the regulations inherent in large-scale organizations have evolved to become more efficient. In their ideal incarnations, that is, operating “without fear or favor,” these enterprises are dedicated to replacing personal preferences with rationally calculated procedures. Rather than control multiple participants through intimidation or favoritism, they implement a division of labor and interpersonal rules designed to effect pre-established goals.

Although no longer as prominent, Weber’s contemporary Vilfredo Pareto (1935) was not as sanguine. Trained as an engineer, he was sensitized to the degree to which ordinary persons eschewed logic in making important decisions. He emphasized the emotional aspects of these choices and the degree to which people sought to manipulate each other. They might attempt to appear rational, but their behaviors had more to do with pursuing power than with honoring rationality. In a sense, his views placed theories such as those of Freud in a social context.

The issue of rationality has thus tended to be framed in terms of impulsive emotions versus cool-headed calculation, with the former cast as the villain of the piece. Presumably, were it not for their brutish passions, people would draw more sensible conclusions. They would intelligently recognize their own interests and cogently plan the
implementation of these ends. On this view, irrationality is a negative force. While it may not be possible to expunge root and branch, it can, and should be, constrained by efforts to limit intense emotionality. In Goleman’s terms, the low road of emotions needs to be controlled by the high road of the cognitions.

**Functional Irrationality**

What has rarely been argued is that irrationality can, in fact, be functional. Postmodernists may declare that rationality is not possible (Bauman, 1993; Norris, 1997), and rational choice theorists that irrationality is less widespread than is generally supposed (Coleman, 1990), but neither argues in favor of irrationality. This has been left to artistic romantics and bomb-throwing anarchists. These persons have denigrated the level-headedness of science and the somber legalisms of the nation state as soulless and debilitating. For them, humanism lies in the celebration of untrammeled emotions. They contend that unless people are free to feel what they feel, when they feel it, they can never truly be themselves.

Still, the romantics have never been taken very seriously by most social scientists. Implied counsels in favor of irrationality have rarely been afforded scientific legitimacy. Nevertheless, irrationality may be both inevitable and to some degree socially useful. Human foolishness may be impossible to suppress, but more than this, it may be beneficial to society as a whole. Indeed, it is possible that large-scale social entities are unworkable without it; that unless people are to some extent irrational, they cannot participate in the interpersonal activities that make large social groupings feasible. Put another way, social organizations, especially sizeable ones, could not survive without substantial doses of irrationality.

A century ago Emile Durkheim (1933) established a sociological tradition in seeking to explain the origins of social solidarity. Like his fellow sociologist George Simmel (Wolff, 1950), he recognized the importance of sociation in explicating human societies. But he went further and sought to elucidate the mechanisms through which people coordinated their activities. Among hunter-gathers he found this instrument in mechanical solidarity; that is, in a like-mindedness grounded in similar life experiences. Among modern participants in a Gesellschaft society (Toennies, 1963), he found it in
organic solidarity; that is, in a realization of mutual dependence. The latter approach provided the adhesive that made it possible for otherwise strangers to treat each other as valued associates.

Yet in this observation also lies a preliminary insight into the how’s, and why’s, of the manner in which societies generate irrationality. Durkheim’s ideas about what fostered social integration were fairly austere, but they had the advantage of recognizing that logic need not be involved. People gravitated together for reasons that were not always intellectually derived. It is possible, however, to take this suggestion a step further. It may well be that the adhesives that hold societies together are not merely a-rational, but are, in some measure, irrational. That which enables people to function in concert may require that they not reason as intelligently as they are otherwise able.

Rational thought is clearly functional in many circumstances (Hechter, 1987). Being capable of figuring out what is true, and being guided by this knowledge when deciding how to act, often facilitate the achievement of essential goals. This competence can assist in the survival of both the individual and the community. Nevertheless, it is also conceivable that mechanisms not grounded in reason also have this effect. To be simplistic, breathing is an, at least, a-rational phenomenon. People engage it without thinking, and in the process maintain their existence. Why then might not the irrational, namely that which is the opposite of reasonable, also prove serviceable? Could not mechanisms that suppress intelligent thought support the maintenance of social integration? Indeed, that is precisely what this essay aims to demonstrate.

It will also be contended that irrationality derives from, and is functional for, the generalist nature of our species (Cronk, 1999). We human beings are plastic in the means through which we pursue survival. The agencies via which we seek nourishment and physical safety are not biologically stereotyped. They are not irreversibly grounded in our genes (Dawkins, 1976), but can be modified as opportunities present themselves (Cronk et al., 2000). Obviously we can, and have, altered our methods of acquiring food and of warding off enemies. Unlike koala bears that must dwell in eucalyptus forests if they are to survive, we have been able to radiate to every corner of the globe. We have been capable of altering our diets, our shelters, and our weapons as the need arose.
But generalists must be flexible. We have to adjust, as change is required. These adjustments also include modifications in forms of social organization. What works for the Inuit cannot prevail in a techno-commercial society. Yet herein lies a rub. Were not social agglomerations stable, they could not be predictable, and were they not predictable, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to coordinate their activities. This means that successful societies must be simultaneously stable and flexible. They must, at times, be conservative and at other times pliable. Still, which is advantageous at any given time is unforeseeable.

The solution to this tension has been a dynamic social churning. Human communities sometimes seem to be static, but they are always in the process of being reconstructed. The players regularly engage in conflicts and negotiations to establish a temporary equilibrium. Nevertheless, in effecting these mechanisms, they are not necessarily rational. They need not, and in most cases usually do not, foresee exactly where they are headed. Rather, the players blunder along only sometimes thinking through their objectives, but more often responding reflexively to external pressures. In the Freudian lexicon, they rationalize their behaviors, and, in many cases, would not respond as is required were they truly rational.

To restate this thesis more succinctly, the mechanisms that allow large numbers of people to work together, and that permit them to adjust to their changing circumstances, are, in part, irrational. If true, this means that irrationality is inevitable for social survival. It also means that irrationality is to some extent beneficial. While not always functional, unreason is sometimes so. This further implies that all successful societies will be an amalgam of the rational and the irrational, in proportions that are not always predictable.

**Defining Irrationality**

Before proceeding to elucidate the forces that hold societies together or to demonstrating how these promote irrationality, it is essential to define what being irrational means. If our central thesis is correct, then the mechanisms that foster social cohesion are not on that account alone sensible. Nevertheless, they might still be described as “rational” were rationality equated with arriving at a functional conclusion. Were an “as if” quality present, they might still be accounted as such. But this is not
what is being asserted here. Contrary to the arguments of Dennis Chong (2000), we will not be identifying behavior as rational if it “might as well” have been rational. That rational thought would have arrived at a particular conclusion will not be deemed sufficient to describe it as being so. This latter will depend upon how a conclusion was actually reached.

Both Max Weber and Herbert Simon have distinguished between substantial and procedural rationality. Substantial rationality exists when a conclusion is correct. When a person arrives at the truth or at the most efficient means of achieving an objective, substantial rationality is described as being present. In contrast, procedural rationality is at hand when the operations through which a conclusion is reached are rational. In this case, it is the procedures one utilizes, not the answers one adopts, that determine one’s reasonableness. Here we will be discussing procedural and not substantial rationality. Since it is the former that refers to thought processes, it alone will govern our analysis. Substantial rationality, in contrast, is about the world and not human mentation. As such, it is beyond human control and therefore separate from the mental operations that are distorted by social pressures.

As presently defined rationality will include both cognitive and instrumental aspects. The methods through which people seek the truth and those via which they pursue effective means of obtaining particular objectives will both be reviewed. Since each concerns mental processes, they both qualify for inclusion. One problem with instrumental rationality, however, involves the objectives sought. Rationality might be measured by stated goals or by operative goals; that is, by what people claim to want versus what their behaviors indicate they really want. Since there can be a difference between the two, a person’s plans might sensibly implement the one, but not the other. In fact, what people do is often consistent with covert, rather than with overt endpoints. They may say, for instance, that they favor democracy, whereas their strategic interventions are designed to further their personal power. In this essay rationality will be measured against both stated and operative aspirations.

Which brings us to our central delineation of rationality, and therefore to a definition of irrationality as well. Rationality shall be said to exist when a person 1)
consults relevant facts when seeking an answer and 2) adopts appropriate logic when
drawing conclusions from these facts. A rational person will utilize available evidence in
deciding what is true and/or effective and will follow canons of logic in making
deductions and/or inductions from this data. This said, not all evidence need be
consulted, but only that which is readily available. Facts not yet discovered, or
inventions not yet made, need not enter a person’s calculations. While a reasonable effort
has to be made to ascertain applicable facts and techniques, what is reasonable may itself
be in dispute. Even so, there will clearly be cases in which cursory efforts to determine
facts and/or effective methodologies are not attempted and are therefore irrational.

Lastly, rationality, and therefore irrationality, refer to important issues. A failure
to think, that is, a failure to consult facts and logic, will be labeled irrational only when
the issues at hand are significant. Since the term irrationality is a pejorative, it would be
unfair to apply it to trivial matters such as deciding where to go to dinner. People need
not be branded irrational merely because they have refrained from engaging in thought.
Indeed, not all human behaviors have to be thought through. This would impose an
unreasonable burden. On the other hand, failing to think through life and death matters
deserves to be condemned. The general who decides upon a military campaign by
tossing chicken bones in the air may once have been considered mainstream, but he can
no longer be accorded this grace.

No doubt there are other satisfactory definitions of rationality, but these are the
conditions that will be applied below. It is, therefore, with reference to these that the
following assertions should be judged. Thus, are there social factors that prevent people
from utilizing facts and logic when they could, and should? And are these factors
necessary to maintain social integrity? Do they, despite being irrational, allow people to
work together and adjust to changing environmental conditions? If so, they may be
functional despite being technically irrational.

Cultural and Structural Adhesives

In what follows it will be contended that both cultural and structural factors
contribute to a pervasive irrationality. Learned and shared ways of life, plus enduring
patterns of interpersonal relationships, combine to discourage thought in almost all
individuals at least some of the time. We human beings are not calculating machines. We do not dispassionately, or automatically, abide by rules of evidence-gathering or principles of logical deduction. Rather we belong to cognitive and moral communities that frequently interfere with individual thought processes. People are also constrained by the hierarchies in which they are embedded, the roles that they play, and the personal relationships in which they are involved. Each of these social domains contributes to welding societies flexibly together, yet they do so by extracting a price. These communal phenomena may, on the whole, advance social survival, but they also, by encouraging a myriad of stupidities, inflict terrible agonies on specific individuals and groups.

Among the cultural factors supporting social solidarity is the reality that we all belong to cognitive communities. What individuals believe is not simply a private matter. In everything from religion to science to geography to personal gossip, we depend upon other people to tell us what is true or not. In this, we participate in communities of knowledge, and of consensual validation, which expand our personal understandings far beyond anything we could personally determine. This makes us reliant on the beliefs of others, but it also allows members of the same group to see the world the same way. By sharing what amount to common cognitive maps, they are able to navigate along communal pathways. In essence, they get along without stepping on each other’s toes because they perceive these toes in the same place. This enables them to adhere in unified aggregates, in part, because they participate in defining the external parameters of their communities. Moreover, with so many heads and eyes contributing to communal understandings, these can be adjusted from many different directions. What the community knows is flexible because it is subject to additions and subtractions from many angles.

Human beings also belong to moral communities (Fein, 1997). The Buddhists tell us that suffering derives from personal desire; hence that these desires should be suppressed. A broader perspective suggests that personal interests precipitate numerous interpersonal conflicts and hence that these need to be controlled lest they lead to perpetual discord. Morality is one of the means through which this is achieved. Every society subscribes to some moral standards. All have rules that they enforce and to which they expect compliance. The motto of Outback Steakhouse may be “No rules; Just
right,” but its managers are unlikely to look the other way if its customers decide to leave without paying their bills. Although there may be less than complete unanimity regarding the required behaviors, that there are shared requirements keeps societies from tearing themselves apart. Moreover, because these requirements can be adjusted as circumstances change, societies can maintain their integrity under evolving conditions.

Among the structural factors sustaining social solidarity are social hierarchies (Lenski, 2005). Human beings are hierarchical animals (Boehm, 1999). They regularly rank themselves with respect to their peers. They want to know who is better and who is worse, and more particularly who is more or less powerful. While there are regular calls for complete parity, experience demonstrates potent pressures in the opposite direction. In any event, hierarchy seems to be socially functional. It enables groups to remain intact and viable by providing for a) imperative coordination, b) distribution of scarce resources, c) sexual selection, d) personal motivation, e) external protection, and f) internal order. Each of these contributions turns out to be necessary for social survival. So vital are they that hierarchies are universal, but also adjustable. While for the most part stabilized into recognized orders, these usually allow for flexibility via competition over relative status. Individuals literally fight for the priority and prestige that go with achieving preeminence, such that there is a circulation of elites (Pareto, 1991).

A second structural factor is social roles. Durkheim (1933) himself recognized the significance of a division of labor in maintaining social order. We human beings divide up the tasks confronting us so as to facilitate cooperative integration of complex activities. If individuals are allowed to specialize in particular aspects of a project in a manner that coordinates with the spheres of expertise of fellow group members, they can together perform operations that no single person could manage. They literally build bridges over great rivers and send astronauts to the moon. What is more, in permitting specialization individuals become adept at their various assignments. They thereby acquire skills from which others also benefit. Likewise, a division of labor based upon a stabilized role structure allows for predictability and flexibility. To understand the roles of others allows one to understand what can be expected of them, but by the same token, albeit perhaps paradoxically, it allows the parties to learn and grow as they are forced to meet the demands made of their specialty.
Lastly, a third structural factor fostering social solidarity is the personal relationship. Human beings do not treat each other as interchangeable, at least, not in their private transactions. Strangers may be fungible, but those with whom one has intimate relationships are not. Married couples, for example, develop attachments to one another. They become emotionally bonded in ways that are difficult, although not impossible, to sever. This allows them to provide each other emotional support and also entangles them in networks of other such linkages. As such, they need not feel alone in what can be a heartless world (Lasch, 1979). Nor need their children feel isolated. Human children require extensive socialization and the family has been the traditional means of providing this (Popenoe, 1996). Love, and not merely propinquity, furnishes the means of transmitting socially necessary lessons from one generation to the next. Even friendships, although a less powerful adhesive, permit people to depend upon one another and thereby to maintain the integrity, but also the plasticity, of the larger assemblage to which they belong.

All in all, there are multiple mechanisms connecting high-spirited creatures, such as ourselves. These permit us to join in identifiable social entities that possess the power to perpetuate themselves, even under unpredictable circumstances. What remains to be seen is if these mechanisms also encourage irrationality. Do these various cultural and structural domains discourage a search for facts or the application of logic?

**Cultural Factors**

To belong to a cognitive community is in many ways to subordinate one’s own mind to that community. Instead of retaining an independence of thought, one voluntarily relinquishes one’s ability to think. One learns to refrain from autonomously pursuing facts or separately applying logic. One goes along with the crowd and accepts its verdicts as definitive. To even question the conventional wisdom may be condemned as disloyal. Independent thinking is regularly treated as an affront to the community and is punished—sometimes with death. On the other hand, mindless conformity is frequently celebrated. It may be regarded as the epitome of wisdom and provide an opportunity to heap unquestioning adherents with honors. They become heroes because they refuse to think in precisely the areas where they might be most tempted to do so.
Exhibit A is faith. As is well understood, those who belong to organized religious communities are expected to adhere to their tenets (Wolfe, 2003). They may be asked to subscribe to a catechism or merely believe in a set of creation stories. Either way, to express doubts is to reject the community. It is to contradict the group’s convictions, and therefore the legitimacy of the congregation itself. To possess a faith is thus to believe without examining the facts. It is to accept what one is told as if it had been personally verified. Similarly, to possess a faith is to believe without examining the inherent logic of those beliefs. That which logically flows from the facts, like the facts themselves, is accepted from others. Indeed, the less likely is that which one is asked to believe, the greater the proof of one’s loyalty. To believe that Mohammed was magically transported to Jerusalem at the time of his death, or that Moses separated the Red Sea, or that the Trinity is simultaneously one and three, is to go against the witness of one’s experience. It is to publicly affirm that one’s communal commitment overrules ones attachment to rationality. To state, as some believers do, that that which on cannot see is more real than that which one can, is to place conventional affirmations above one’s own senses. It is to allow oneself to believe in that which never was nor ever will be.

Exhibit B is ideology. Many secular individuals take pleasure in mocking what they take to be the fantasies of their religious brethren. Yet they too, after their fashion, are true believers (Hoffer, 1951). They also accept doctrines promoted by others and hold on to them with a lethal tenacity. Ideologies instruct those who acknowledge them both on the way the world is constituted and on how it is to be reformed. This is surely so with such secular manifestations of ideology as Marxism, fascism, and anarchism (Marx, 1967). Take the case of the Russian brand of communism. Those who accepted its legitimacy were expected to toe the party line. Whatever the twists and turns of the governing elite, the rank and file were required to concur (Radosh and Radosh, 2005). However unlikely its advent, they were obliged to believe in the complete equality of all persons in the impending dictatorship of the proletariat. This conformity was dramatically on display just prior to World War II. Party members first despised Hitler, then after the German-Soviet Pact praised him, then after the German invasion of Russia reversed themselves once again. Many American communists performed these gymnastics even at the expense of their careers. They subordinated their personal
judgments to those of their party handlers and became apologists for positions that ultimately, i.e., especially after the war, made them social pariahs. Many even found it possible to justify Stalin’s purges long after their countrymen recognized the viciousness of these show trials (Montefiore, 2004).

In general, cognitive communities defer to authority figures. They assume that some individuals have greater insights into the truth than do others. Those in positions of power, be they priests, professors, or political leaders, are frequently assumed to be more intelligent and better informed than ordinary folks (Barnard, 1938). They are on this account afforded a mandate not unlike that accorded parents by small children. The young live in a world hedged in by uncertainties. Their limited experience and bounded mental faculties prevent them from comprehending much of what is occurring around them. As a result, they depend upon their parents to interpret what is transpiring. Although this might be thought to be a reasonable strategy (de Tocqueville, 1966), it is not grounded in a reasoned decision. A tendency to defer to the powerful is built into the human psyche. It occurs almost reflexively. As a consequence, it takes place whether or not it is defensible. A child, or an authority besotted adult, may equally believe assurances that the sun will rise in the morning or that the world is flat.

The situation is similar to that found in the research of Solomon Asche (1956). When he arranged for experimental subjects to be exposed to a group of his confederates who claimed that the longer of two lines was in fact the shorter, most went along with the majority and even questioned the validity of their senses. Related to this propensity, although pertaining to instrumental rather than to cognitive rationality, were Stanley Milgram’s (1974) investigations. He discovered that his subjects would inflict what they thought were painful electrical shocks on fellow subjects as long as they were instructed to do so by the investigator. His authority was such that it over-ruled their own sympathetic impulses. Interpersonal authority, in short, can be such that it nullifies the evidence of one’s own eyes or the conclusions of one’s personal judgment. People act as if they were automatons programmed by others rather than independent arbiters of truth or effectiveness. Although they possess the capacity to review the facts for themselves and to deduce what is practical, they do not. Instead, they, as it were, subordinate their brains to external forces.
Another quirk of cognitive communities is that their understandings are frequently mediated by fictional accounts. Because the world is complicated, it is often difficult to encompass all of its details mentally. The solution is to embrace stories and/or generalizations that reduce reality to neat, easily assimilated packages. People individually, and as groups, adopt these imaginary packets as surrogates for what they could perceive were they committed to doing so. They may, for instance, accept stereotypes as accurate representations of the abilities of particular individuals. If someone belongs to a recognized category, he or she may be thought to possess the qualities attributed to that grouping (Fein, 2001). Even blatant evidence to the contrary is summarily dismissed. We obviously discern this tendency with respect to outcast groups. People will believe that an individual Black has rhythm because they belong to a community that supports the generalization that all Blacks have rhythm. Evidence that this person is tone deaf will be discounted in favor of a simplified, and socially acceptable, version of reality. In other word’s, the society’s authority is transmitted via one-dimensional constructs that are over-simplified, in part, because it is easier for groups to share uncomplicated representations than complex ones.

Also easier for individuals and groups to manage are stories. The human mind and the communication patterns in which they are enmeshed are such that anthropomorphized narratives are more effortlessly grasped than abstract concepts (Pinker, 1997). People are so attuned to understanding their world in terms of human motives and social interaction patterns that these become a prototype that is imposed on almost any circumstance. Be it the weather, the motion of the planets, or outbreaks of disease, all are reduced to quasi-human agencies, e.g., to divine interventions. So normal is this mode of thinking that social groups adopt common narratives through which they explain natural phenomena. Among these are religious and ideological myths. Communities might, for instance, explain the occurrence of winter in stories about the kidnapping of a God or explicate why there is evil in the world via tales about fallen angels. Similarly they might make sense of human misery by attributing it to exploitation as sponsored by greedy capitalists and then credit the imminent abolition of this abuse with laying the groundwork for an egalitarian utopia (Marx, 1967). In all of these cases, it is what people imagine, rather than what they perceive, that takes precedence. Should
they have doubts, the fact that these are socially endorsed stories provides a solidity that eases their minds and allows them to continue believing. How, after all, could that which the community certifies be less than true? How could a decent person presume to question that which everyone else accepts as the case?

To belong to moral communities is also to submit to the judgments of others. It also entails turning off one’s mental faculties in favor of decisions rendered by others. Morality, to be sure, is not about cognitive issues per se (Fein, 1997). It is not about facts, but rules of behavior; even though these rules may be treated as if they were facts. People talk about moral standards as if they were discovered truths, or, at least, revealed ones. It is as if they were parts of nature, or perhaps elements of a supernatural reality. On this view, morality is absolute (Kant, 1956). Its rulings are eternal and incapable of being refuted. As a consequence, they must be accepted on the word of moral authorities. Whether these rely on a religious or a secular sanction, such leaders are merely transmitting verities to which others must assent. Independent conclusions are impossible considering that these truths exist outside the operations of any particular mind. Others, of course, deny the unconditional nature of moral standards. They believe that such prescriptions are relative. On their view, moral rules are socially constructed, and are, therefore, open to re-construction. Since each society makes its own rules, their validity is ascertainable only in terms of a society’s own judgments (Westermarck, 1960; Freeman, 1996). Recently moral relativism has been further democratized such that each person is presumably allowed to his or her own moral authority (Wolfe, 2001). That which he or she believes to be morally valid is so for him or her because it is one’s personal commitment that makes it moral in the first place.

The problem with these accounts is that neither the absolutist nor the relativist versions of morality is accurate. Neither correctly describes the way morality operates. First, the absolutists are wrong in believing that morality never changes. Students of history are aware that the rules to which people are committed have transmuted with time and circumstances (Nietzsche, 1989). There was an era, as in ancient Greece, when hospitality was reckoned nearly sacred, and another, e.g., in the American West, when horse theft was regarded as a hanging offense. The advent of hotels and automobiles, however, changed attitudes towards these transgressions. And while it might be thought
that murder is always considered a terrible violation, what has counted as murder has varied. To illustrate, during the European Middle Ages, when an aristocrat cut down an offending serf this was regarded as his right, if not his duty.

Second, the absolutists are wrong in believing that morality is discovered, as might be a scientific fact. Moral rules are not like an exotic species of beetle that is detected by turning over the appropriate rock. The philosopher G.E. Moore (1960) may have believed that “the good” was as perceptible a quality as is the color yellow, but few others have been able to see what he claimed to distinguish. In any event, people have certainly claimed to see different things under matching circumstances. Nor does turning to revelation resolve this problem. Those who appeal to divine authority are presented with the predicament that different religious figures subscribe to differing revelations. If there is a God, he certainly does not speak to everyone in identical terms. Third, absolutists are in error in assuming that morality is exactly calculated. They seem to suppose that specific rules always lead to identical deductions as to what should be done. In fact, moral rules are open to interpretation. Not even the Ten Commandments mean the same thing to all religious denominations (Fein, 1999). Nor, indeed, do most people consciously decide what is right by appealing to a moral syllogism. They are more likely to feel that something is right or wrong and then go ahead.

But these difficulties do not let the relativists off the hook. They too are in error about how morality operates. Moral rules many change, and they may be socially constructed, but they are not as arbitrary as many relativists seem to believe. First, to assert at these rules are socially created does not mean that they can be remade in any shape that reformers desire. The very fact that they are social creations indicates that they are not personal inventions. Individuals may contribute to modifying a community’s standards, but they do not control their starting point, nor final destination. To play a part in formulating the rules is not to mold them any way one desires. Other people too have a say and hence the final outcome is a collective venture. Second, personal moral rules are a contradiction in terms. A standard to which one, and only one, person is committed is not a social standard. It is not a shared yardstick that can restrain interpersonal conflicts. Moral rules are, by definition, social instruments. They are collectively produced and collectively enforced. As such, an individual cannot arbitrarily decide what
is moral and what is not. Third, relativists are wrong in asserting that one cannot contradict the rules of different societies; that what each of these believes is right is right for itself. If the members of one society can participate in modifying the rules of their own community, there is no reason why they cannot participate in modifying the rules of another. Since there is no overarching principle that enjoins societies from influencing the moral structures of others, they are free to do so.

How then does morality operate, and how do these operations affect personal rationality? Morality, it must be insisted, is a social phenomenon. This means that it can be studied empirically. The ways that moral rules are created, enforced, and modified are all open to observation and scientific codification. They are not impenetrable mysteries, but ordinary human activities. To begin with, morality is about rules. But these are not rules as if often imagined. Moral rules are not formal rules. They are not definitive in character, or official in scope. Rather they are informal rules. Their formulation may seem to be precise, but is not. There may, for instance, be a rule against lying, but what it covers is anything but exact. Certainly, it does not forbid all untruths. Some lies, after all, are considered “white lies.” Others are not even called lies: they are labeled “tact.” There are, as it were, a myriad of exceptions to the lying rule, but these are rarely, if ever specified. We, in fact, learn these exceptions paradigmatically. The nature of what is being proscribed is ascertained more through example than exhortation. What is sanctioned, rather than what is commended, teaches us what is really considered right or wrong. These characteristics, moreover, are conducive to both stability and flexibility. They allow the rules to be transmitted from one generation to another, but they also allow for wiggle room. Because moral rules are elastic, they can be stretched to cover unforeseen circumstances. Also, because they are inexact, individuals who do not believe precisely the same thing can subscribe to common principles. They can all agree to belong to a common moral community because they apply what seems to be the same formulation without necessarily meaning the same thing.

The second most salient aspect of morality is that its rules are socially negotiated. Sometimes circumstances change so dramatically that reinterpretation is not sufficient to meet emerging social needs. In this case the rules must be altered; more to the point, they must be renegotiated. What occurs is presently on display in disputes over abortion and
gay marriage, and historically on exhibit in quarrels over prohibition and religious tolerance. But like moral rules themselves, these negotiations possess singular characteristics. To be more direct, they are polarized negotiations. They are typically composed of two factions that regard themselves as diametrically opposed. The one side considers itself good and the other bad, whereas their adversaries possess mirror image convictions (Fein, 1997). As a consequence, neither side trusts the other, nor will listen carefully to one another. To do so might allow oneself to be influenced by bad guys, which would be intolerable. This attitude leads to extreme positions that are supposed to be endorsed with inflexible tenacity. Each side demands a conformity of its adherents that amounts to an orthodoxy. Within one’s faction disagreement is treated as apostasy; that is, as a form of betrayal. This extremism also lends itself to idealism. The good, as perceived by each side, is simplified and idealized into something perfect, but, in most cases, also into something that is utterly impractical. In the long run, a reconciliation is effected, but not between the extremists of either party. They tend to remain dedicated to what they perceive as non-negotiable principles. It is folks more toward the middle who arrive at a loose, informal consensus.

Polarized negotiations allow for moral flexibility by recruiting the energies of opposing advocates. The extremists may not open to persuasion, but their dedication to their beliefs permits them to make the strongest cases for their positions. The tensions between the contending factions also allow for numerous intermediate opinions to contribute to what is ultimately a collective covenant. As a result, these emerging rules factor in interests from many points on the social compass. They also promote long-term stability by fostering standards that eventually command widespread assent. In the meantime, however, while the negotiation is in progress, rationality may be thrown out the window. Activists on both sides of the equation have no interest in assessing facts as presented by the other side. Nor do they welcome complex truths that might be relevant to illuminating their own stance. Their desire is instead for a simple narrative that can be enforced among their allies. Neither are they friends to logic. That which might lead in directions other than those they favor is unwelcome. Idealism may be seductive, but it is rarely rational. Its promises are hardly ever grounded in facts or logic. The more often
rely on comforting fictions. It is these that mobilize people to fight the stout moralistic fight.

But paradigmatic rules and polarized negotiations are not the only aspects of morality that promote irrationality. Moral rules are also enforced and negotiated through emotional means. Both internally and externally these standards are sanctioned by intense affects. They are not injunctions about which people feel neutral. Were they so, they would not be regarded as moral at all. That which fails to elicit passion is generally regarded as unimportant, whereas moral regulations are anything but insignificant. Consider the situation with moral anger. The emotion of anger is rarely considered ethical in isolation. More usually it is regarded as crude and uncivilized (Lorenz, 1966). Yet moral indignation is another matter entirely. It is bursting with principled righteousness. To be angry, even violently angry, in favor of some moral end is to be a moral crusader. It is to be a paladin on behalf of eternal goodness. Indeed, a failure to be angry when moral rules are violated is to be immoral. Merely to shrug when one person murders another is a sign of moral degeneracy. It is an indicator that a person is not internally committed to promoting what is right.

Nor would engaging in a moral negotiation without the requisite anger be appropriate. To be for (or against) abortion without ever expressing indignation toward the beliefs of one’s opponents is an indication that one does not care. It is to renounce all hope of influencing others to adopt one’s position. Anger—if it is suitably expressed—is a mechanism for gaining the attention of others and for communicating what one believes important. To forsake its employment is thus to abandon efforts to convince others to move in one’s direction. Yet utilizing anger to promote moral negotiations or to enforce agreed upon rules is not without danger. Anger can be incredibly stupid. When intense it can even be homicidally obtuse. Angry people are not good listeners. Nor are they moderate in the punishments they impose. Anger, especially when it tips over into rage, is the epitome of irrationality (Fein, 1993; Goleman, 2006). Neither facts nor logic restrain its efforts; hence it can engage in instinctive vengeance.

Anger, in another of its aspects, is intimately involved with maintaining moral commitments. When anger is turned inward, we call it guilt. It then becomes an internal
agent for maintaining conformity to accepted standards. If a rule is violated, the guilty person becomes angry with him or herself and forces the self into line. This mechanism allows morality to be self-enforcing. People can be depended upon to follow a predictable course because they sanction themselves when necessary. Others do not have to rely on external monitoring when this is more effectively implemented by the person him or herself. Yet guilt too can be irrational if it is overdone. If a person’s internal anger is too strong, it becomes the equivalent of rage. A person literally persecutes him or herself for imaginary faults. Here too, he or she may be so infuriated that facts and logic do not penetrate to modify misguided efforts at self-reform.

Other emotions too are implicated in making morality work, and, upon occasion, in going off the rationality tracks. Not always recognized for its role in moral operations is shame. Frequently confused with guilt, the potency of this passion is regularly underestimated. Japanese culture has often been described as shame based (Benedict, 1934), but whether or not this is true, there can be little doubt that this emotion is one of the motivators of seppuku, that is, of ritual suicide. Japanese warriors killed themselves when they “lost face,” that is, when they brought shame upon themselves or their leaders. One form of seppuku was hara-kiri, that is, belly-cutting. It is difficult to imagine a more violent form of self-inflicted death, but shame was sufficient to set it in motion. In the West, shame has not had this effect, but here too it remains a potent sanction. People who are shamed feel as if they might as well die. Indeed, they often say as much. But shame is really about negative attention. When a person is ridiculed, the resultant embarrassment is such that he or she wishes to disappear. He or she wants to become invisible so as not to be subject to this undesirable attention. It is this reaction that allows shame to regulate morality. If a person is ridiculed for breaking a moral rule, the impetus is to drop out of sight. But this removes the person as a model for the behavior of others. No longer prepared to flaunt his of her rule breaking, others are less likely to learn from it paradigmatically. In short, it is difficult to emulate that which is no longer visible. Yet like anger and guilt shame can be overdone. It may not only motivate suicide, but social timidity. People too susceptible to shame are thereby socially disabled. They do not assert themselves when they could, or should. So eager are they to disappear that they fall off their own radar screen and do not hear the facts or logic that might salvage their
honor. Encapsulated in a self-imposed bubble of invisibility, they minds are concerned only with finding avenues of escape.

Very similar to shame in its mode of operation is disgust. It too seeks to stimulate a self-imposed invisibility. A person who is an object of disgust is treated as if he or she were ripe excrement. Others avoid such a person as they might contaminated materials. The manner in which such an individual behaves elicits statements such as: You make me sick. Or, You turn my stomach. The consequence is, therefore, social isolation. Since people hate to be isolated as much as they dislike being ridiculed, they refrain from behaving in ways that might bring this about. They too no longer act in ways that might serve as inappropriate models for others. In this, they both conform to accepted moral standards and refrain from spreading unacceptable ones. Yet disgust too can be overdone with outcomes similar to those of shame. It too can promote an isolation that creates a barrier to facts and logic. It too turns a person into his or her own enemy; into someone who is uncomfortable with his or her own company.

Pareto long ago implicated strong emotions in supporting irrationality (Pareto, 1991), but an understanding of how morality operates explains one of the major conduits through which this occurs. As the cognitive psychologists have discovered, the mental circuits through which the emotions function are separated from the higher cognitive faculties. This means that that if morality is largely supported by strong emotions, it may be at odds with the circuits that govern an assessment of facts and logic. If this is true, then the power of morality to control interpersonal conflict is contingent upon a degree of irrationality. People would not be motivated to follow these rules or to enforce them were they not emotionally prompted to do so. A morality dependent solely upon rational calculation would be bloodless and therefore easy to ignore. It would possess all magnetism of a multiplication table. Nor would it be stable over time. Moral commitments that that could be altered by the introduction of a few facts or by a logical argument might turn on a dime. Strong emotions, however, tend to be very conservative. They can be very persistent. Intense anger does not dissipate quickly, nor does intense shame evaporate over night. They can, therefore, keep a person, or a society, moving along the same pathways for years, or even centuries. This, of course, produces stability at the price of flexibility. Unfortunately, while it can keep people, and societies, doing
what they need to do in order to survive, it can also keep them doing stupid things in the face of compelling counter-evidence. They may, as did the Aztecs, continue cutting out the hearts of living victims (Harris, 2001) or, as did those in the American South, shunning the company of pariah peoples. Communities, and individuals, will have to depend for change upon other aspects of morality, namely, moral negotiations, which, while they can too be irrational, are able to modify deeply held convictions.

Among the specific ways in which morality can be profoundly irrational, but nevertheless socially functional, is through the operation of object lessons (Fein, 1997). Because moral instructions are transmitted paradigmatically, those who wish to advance a particular perspective often do so by singling out cases in point. They habitually demonstrate what is not to be done by making an individual the poster boy of unacceptable behavior. This individual will then be unmercifully attacked. Anger, shame and disgust are all heaped on his or her head. The intension is to convert him or her into the worst imaginable villain so that others will not be tempted to follow a similar path. George W. Bush and William J. Clinton are familiar with what this means of control first hand. Bush, in particular, has been demonized as a fascist, a Nazi, and a worse terrorist than Saddam Hussein. Those who hate him and what he stands for want to make it clear that no civilized person should follow his lead. They have no concern with whether their allegations are literally true or if the pain they inflict on the victim is justified. The goal is moral salvation, hence facts and logic be damned. In their view, the social good to be derived from their victory overwhelms any collateral damage.

Lastly, moral fictions can be another less than rational side effect of the moral mechanisms that maintain social integrity. Also derivative of paradigmatic means of teaching moral lessons, these are stories about the good and righteous that may have nothing to do with actual events (Fein, 1997). Like object lessons involving individuals, they aim at providing riveting examples of what is desired or abhorred. Myths are not merely reserved for transmitting facts; they are also employed to prescribe behaviors. As such, stories about how Marie Antoinette blithely recommended that her subjects eat cake when there was no bread available are designed to demonstrate her heartlessness. The object was to destroy monarchialism root and branch, not to be historically accurate. Likewise, finding a right to privacy in the American Constitution, when none is explicitly
included in the document, provides a rational for court decisions otherwise found valuable (Flynn, 2004). Here again what is true is considered beside the point in the larger quest for social justice.

**Structural Factors**

The ways in which societies are structurally organized also conduce to an irrationality that can be functional. As hierarchical animals human beings organize themselves in stratified groupings that must also be both stable and flexible. Functions such as imperative coordination, the distribution of scarce resources, sexual selection, personal motivation, external protection, and internal order are too important to a society’s survival to be neglected or allowed to stagnate. People must know who is in charge, who is to obtain what goods, who will mate with whom, who can be counted on to perform onerous jobs, and who will protect whom. Nevertheless, the persons assigned to particular statuses may need to be altered from time to time. The utterly incompetent cannot be allowed to monopolize positions of influence, nor can death be permitted to immobilize social operations. People must know who ranks above, or below, whom so as to know who will exercise leadership and who followership, but they must also feel secure in the fitness of those who lead. If replacements are necessary, there must be a means of fostering mobility. This is generally furthered by procedures that allow subordinates to challenge the supremacy of their superiors. Yet these can reintroduce the quarrels that hierarchies ordinarily contain. The result is a tension between dysfunctional rigidities and dysfunctional rebellions. The fundamental fact of human hierarchy ensures that structural rankings thus established will never be fully settled, nor smoothly adjudicated; that there will always be irrational factors promoting constancy or allowing for plasticity.

The central feature that creates and maintains hierarchies is the test of strength (Fein, 2001). Individuals compare themselves to others to determine which of them is superior in qualities deemed essential for social survival. In some cases this might be hunting skills, in others military prowess, and in still others economic acumen. Then just as with mountain sheep, the parties do the equivalent to butting heads to ascertain who is best. After such a test one emerges as the winner and the other as the loser. The loser
then backs down and acknowledges the victory of the winner. For a while, at least, there will be no renewal of the challenge. In fact, the results of the contest will tend to be perpetuated by cognitive means. The winner will have obtained a reputation for being stronger and the loser one for being weaker. This then influences the attitudes of the players and those who have observed their competition. The resultant perceptions help these individuals decide with whom and where to launch subsequent challenges. In essence, they aid them in constructing mental maps of who outranks whom.

It must be understood, however, that the larger the society, the more likely these clashes will occur on a symbolic level (Bourdieu, 1980). In massive communities, individuals will not literally fight with one another, but manipulate signs of power in their attempts to cause rivals to back down. The ways they speak, the houses in which they live, and the jobs they occupy all serve as surrogates for the personal strengths with which they hope to awe potential competitors. Then too there are halo effects. Those who have demonstrated strengths in circumscribed areas may be thought to possess advantages in other areas as well. Their reputation for strength is, as it were generalized, and becomes a sign of strengths they do not enjoy. Superior wealth, for instance, may be conflated with superior insights into the human condition.

There is also the additional wrinkle that human tests of strength need not be between individuals. People cultivate alliances with which to confront competing alliances. They understand that a large coalition of individuals can usually best a less extensive coalition. This is what politics is all about. As a result, an individual can emerge as a power to be contended with, not because he is physically superior to others, or even because he is smarter than they, but because he or she has the ability to mobilize a more potent combination of supporters. This ability may be due to superior family connections, better social skills, or greater political competence. It may even be contingent upon an inherited social position, e.g., by being the eldest son of the king who by this means inherits his father’s kingship. Here too symbols play a role, for it is often more important that others perceive one has powerful allies than to actually have them.

If each of these claims is valid, then the circumstances they represent are also capable of introducing irrationalities. It is decidedly not the case that the objectively
strongest, or most effective, leader always emerges at the top of the social ladder. It is emphatically not the rule that shifts in social ranking result from dispassionate, fact and logic based, calculations as to who is strongest. Nor do replacements always occur when replacements might be useful. Because virtually all of the players want to succeed in the hierarchical game, and because they do not always play fair in pursuing precedence, disinterested calculations of superiority rarely prevail. Nor must we neglect the wear and tear inherent in the process. Attempts to achieve hierarchical primacy are not free from irrational damage. People, including innocent bystanders, get hurt in the process of vying for power. Unnecessary pain is inflicted; pain that does not flow from an impartial reckoning of what would be most socially functional. Neither, when individuals get to the top of the heap need their actions be rational or functional. They can, and often do, make stupid decisions that do not serve their social or personal interests. Hierarchy as a whole may be a functional institution, but this does not indicate that every aspect of its operation is functional.

Let us begin at the top. Those who are fortunate enough to prevail in overall tests of strength can have a myriad of personal limitations. Just because they have won an election to high office, or inherited billions of dollars, or led an army to a crushing victory, does not mean they always make intelligent decisions. Nor does it mean that they are emotionally secure. Those who emerge as leaders can possess qualities that permit victory at a particular time and place, but that will not help them govern once they have achieved superiority. As Lord Acton famously declared, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely (Benn and Peters, 1959). Individuals who arrive at the top may therefore follow policies that suit their own interests, but not those of other members of the community. They arrogantly assume that they know what is best for all, when in fact they are completely out of touch with the realities of their situation or that of their society. If they do engage in thought—and they may not—they may nonetheless be impervious to inputs that do not accord with their private impulses. Facts contrary to what they want to believe may be dismissed out of hand, while unwelcome logic will be utterly ignored. It is not without reason that millennia of followers have feared leaders who “shoot unwelcome messengers.”
Then there are the insecurities inherent in reaching the top of what Benjamin Disraeli depicted as a greasy pole (Ludwig, 2002). Those who win tests of strength or who have inherited advantages that enable them to claim a pride of place know that these victories are conditional. They understand that challenges to power are normal and that what was won today can be lost tomorrow. They also understand that they are only human and hence vulnerable. Even leaders who represent themselves as divine typically recognize their mortality. If anything, endeavors to appear super-human betray a need to seem stronger than one is. The fears thereby revealed can then motivate efforts to cheat and/or to be Draconian.

Anxious leaders accordingly aspire to hide their defects. They do not want subordinates to recognize the niceties of their vulnerability. This may include efforts to conceal their weaknesses from themselves, all the better to fool others. Anxious leaders also engage in subterfuges. They tell lies; they participate in subterranean plots; they declare themselves neutral when they are not. Such superiors notoriously deceive themselves about the realities of their situation. To demonstrate, they regularly convince themselves that their denunciations of others are based on actual transgressions by these competitors rather than on bald-faced power grabs. Insecure super-ordinates can, in addition, be exceedingly cruel. They may subject others to inhuman tortures in order to persuade them, and bystanders, that resistance is not feasible. In this, they can be more forceful than is necessary. Rather than accurately calculate what would overawe others, they engage in excesses because they do not intend to take chances. Less objectionably, apprehensive leaders resort to political payoffs. They promise others rewards for compliance even though these spoils may be inimical to the larger goals they endorse. In this case, who is promised what typically depends more on vague intuitions about what may work than on facts or logic based computations.

One of the worst by-products of large-scale hierarchies is tyranny (Chirot, 1994). Leaders, but sometimes entire social classes, can be so vigorous in their efforts to maintain superiority that they engage in wholesale atrocities. Under these circumstances, they can be so brutal in commanding obedience that they undermine their legitimacy. Instead of recognizing that this may instigate resistance, they provoke the very insurrections they fear. So anxious can a Stalin or a Mao be that they misperceive
threats, such as an impending German invasion or a self-imposed economic collapse. They then undercut their own security through indiscriminate purges of military officers or nation-wide deportations to the gulag (Montefiore, 2004). Likewise, so intoxicated can they be with their mental prowess that they formulate projects with utterly unanticipated consequences, then pursue them anyway. They literally, as did Mao, conceive of a “war on sparrows” hypothetically intended to protect the community from the depredations of erstwhile vermin, but that eventuates in a horrendous famine once hordes of insects multiply after the birds that formerly controlled them are exterminated (Fein, 1999).

Below the upper echelons of contemporary societies one now find members of the middle class (Fein, 2005). They may have not as much power as occupants of the upper classes, but neither are they impotent. Often professionals and middle managers, they are responsible for implementing a myriad of social policies. While their duties too can be subverted by arrogance and insecurity, a more customary failing is blind conformity. In the 1960s, corporate executives were castigated as a phalanx of men in grey flannel suits, but even today many are committed to going along to get along. Rather than rock the boat and jeopardize their careers, they accept directives they know to be faulty. In an effort to curry favor, they ignore inconvenient facts and deductions that might displease their superiors. As long as they can escape direct blame for the resultant fiascos, they are content to allow periodic crises to subside while they maintain the alliances that allow them to proceed up the organizational ladder.

Nowadays there is also the “Bobo” phenomenon. This designation was coined by David Brooks (2000) and refers to “bourgeois bohemians.” As Brooks has rightly observed, contemporary leaders more often owe their success to a good education than to family connections. As professionals and middle managers, they are hired because of their academic credentials and presumed expertise. University derived testimonials to their competence, albeit symbolic, are accepted as evidence of leadership potential. But these bobos do not necessarily identify with these management roles. They may be managers, but they more often feel like academics. Their goal may thus not be to make money, but to achieve creative distinction. As such, they misperceive their own power. They then attack the very organizations that provide them with a comfortable lifestyle
and of which they are an integral element. Determined to maintain their artistic credentials, they relentlessly deny the facts of their situation.

Yet it is at the bottom of the hierarchical order that one finds the most egregious examples of situational stupidity. It is at this level that one finds the poor and disenfranchised who are most likely to turn off their brains (Lewis, 1966). Those above them frequently subvert their decision-making responsibilities, but they nevertheless engage in social planning. The poor and subordinate, however, are often deprived of this opportunity. They are instead expected to be obedient; not to be innovators (Kohn and Schooler, 1983). As a consequence, they have little incentive to engage in personal thinking. Why put one’s energy into coming up with plans, when these will not be taken seriously? Like omega wolves that are not permitted to mate, they may possess the biological equipment to perform mental activities, but their social position discourages their usage. The upshot is that they do not seek to ascertain facts or to engage in careful deductions. For them, these are all so much intellectual folderol. They feel phony and utterly unwarranted.

One of the ways these attitudes are expressed is through boredom. Those from the lower social strata typically reject schooling because they find it unstimulating. Although on some level they too understand that nowadays education provides the strengths that allow for economic mobility, they decline it as inappropriate for themselves. They would rather work outside or with their hands, even though this makes them subordinate to the posturing highbrows they despise. Instead, they tend toward oppositionalism. Whatever their betters propose, they reflexively resist. They do not calculate what might be in their interest but automatically assume that if it comes from above, it must be detrimental to them. This is what led many union members to make demands that in the long run undercut their job security. It is also found in the pugnacious in-your-face negativism of the behemoth wrestlers so admired by many working stiffs.

Particularly productive of irrationality are lower class limitations in EQ. Goleman (2006) has argued that EQ, that is, emotional quotient, is as important in achieving social success as is IQ. As he has put it, one’s IQ can get a person a job, but a high EQ is
needed to keep it. A person must be able to control intense emotions in order to take advantage of their motive power. Sadly, the poor, because they are social losers, are commonly angry and frightened. Having sustained numerous indignities, they flaunt a bravado that looks potent, but conceals a multitude of insecurities. Nevertheless, an ability to control one’s rage and terror is fundamental to levelheaded thinking. Emotions that are set on a hair trigger make it virtually impossible to evaluate facts and logic calmly. Little things throw one off-stride and stimulate conflicts that might otherwise be unnecessary. Life becomes filled with frictions that exacerbate one’s emotional lability. Instead of intelligently participating in powerful social coalitions, one reacts spontaneously and often foolishly. Violence and resentment, rather than prudent planning, becomes the order of the day and trap one in a disorganized world of unreliable relationships and economic stagnation.

The nature of human hierarchies is thus a potent inducement to irrationality, but so is the character of social roles. To begin with not all social roles are equally desirable. Some jobs, for instance, are dirtier and more dangerous than others. Some personal roles are also more emotionally fulfilling than others. But if there is a difference in the attractiveness of various roles, there is likewise an unequal distribution of them. Some individuals get the cushier tasks, while others get stuck with the less advantageous ones. As might be expected, this stimulates a competition for the superior slots. Individuals essentially negotiate with one another to determine who will occupy which positions. Yet, as with hierarchy, this process need not be a fair or rational. More to the point, the role structures thereby established are not neutrally calculated to achieve the optimal social outcomes. Nor are they objectively maintained. Thought-free human impulses are far more central to what occurs.

As with other structural and cultural adhesives, a central issue with social roles is simultaneous providing stability and flexibility. Were individuals unable to predict the roles of others, they would be unable to coordinate their responses with them. Similarly, were these roles unable to be adjusted, they would soon become dysfunctional. This problem is solved by creating and distributing roles via social negotiations, then stabilizing them via internalized role scripts. Individuals jostle for position making innumerable demands of one another along the way, but en route they acquire cognitive,
emotional, and volitional interjects that subsequently guide their role behaviors. Unfortunately, their original role negotiations can be dramatically unfair in that they are often conducted between individuals who differ in power—most notably between parents and children. This allows for role assignments that can be less than equitable. Then the resulting social scripts are excessive in their demands for conformity, often preventing individuals from modifying what it would be sensible to modify. Much to their own dismay—although usually unconsciously—they enforce their own misery.

For the sake of brevity, the present discussion will be limited to dysfunctional personal roles (Fein, 1990). To begin with, families are not the quiet bastions of interpersonal equity that romantics would have us believe. To the contrary, they are frequently cockpits of conflict. The parties struggle to divide up a multitude of tasks with which they may later become personally identified. Yet not all of these tasks are equally conducive to needs fulfillment. Some are more onerous than others. In alcoholic families, for instance, one child may be burdened with the role of family hero. His or her job is to save the others from themselves, regretfully often at the expense of his or her personal happiness. In other families, one of their number becomes the designated scapegoat. This person’s assignment is to assume the blame for problems initiated by the others. In this case too, one’s personal happiness may be forfeit to the needs of others. But in neither instance does the person allocated the dysfunctional role do so voluntarily. Far more usually, the selfish imposition of coercion, and not the rational determination of a utilitarian calculus, decides who does what.

At this point, the makeup of role scripts kicks in. The individual who gets stuck with a dysfunctional role, let us say that of scapegoat, learns to think, feel, and plan in ways that perpetuate that role. Despite the personal pain this causes, the person him or herself afterward cooperates in maintaining the role. Having been forced to bear the blame for others, this person may come to think of him or herself as responsible for their travail. Repeated accusations will have convinced him or her, often as a child too young to know better, that he or she is the sort of person the causes trouble. On top of this, the victim will feel guilty. He or she will blame him or herself for what goes wrong, and this internal anger, like most strong emotions, will be slow to dissipate. Subsequently, the target may attempt to recover some measure of security by voluntarily admitting guilt.
The hope will be that in doing so the payoff will be acceptance. The other members of the family may blame him or her, but at least they embrace the victim as one of their own. Finally, the scapegoat having adopted this constellation of beliefs, feelings and plans will in future years seek out role partners also inclined to blame him of her for the faults of others. In other words, the conservatism of a person’s role script will induce him or her to enter relationships with role partners who make demands and judgments similar to those of his or her youth. Despite the apparent irrationality of doing so, the person will make this choice in pursuit of continuing to feel socially accepted. He or she will not carefully examine the facts or correcting deduce who is responsible for what. To the contrary, his or her anxieties precipitate selections that maintain the status quo. That there are other divisions of labor that might eventuate in a more satisfying role assignment will not occur to such a person.

What makes the conservatism of dysfunctional social roles all the more onerous is that they are difficult to alter. A person does not give up an unfulfilling role by rationally deciding that it is time to for something different. That which has been deeply internalized, especially that which has been emotionally internalized, is not available to transformation by facts and logic. It must be emotionally relinquished and then renegotiated under more equitable conditions than formerly prevailed. That which was entailed in the original role negotiation must be re-experienced in all its sordid anguish and then released via a period of sorrow. Sadness is the sovereign mechanism for disengaging from losses, and a dysfunctional role is such a loss (Fein, 1990). This process is best described as resocialization, yet resocialization is decidedly not a matter of neutral mental alterations. Resocialization allows for the transformation of that which is dysfunctional, but not for willy-nilly change.

Which brings us to one last structural factor in propagating irrationality. These are our personal relationships. Intimate relationships, of course, have a longstanding reputation for irrationality. Love and sex have hardly ever been considered matters of careful, well thought out, calculations. Those who have experienced these interpersonal bonds recognize them as mentally perplexing. People have a disquieting way of making inexplicable choices in their close partnerships. Love, as they say, has a way of making fools of us all. Of a sudden we are attracted to a person that we know is not good for us,
or one who we know will not return our affection, but we cannot help ourselves. It is as if we are swept away by forces out of our control. We know that we shouldn’t be jealous, yet we are. We know that we shouldn’t cheat, but we do. We long for love and sexual passion that will last forever, but we fear that we will never really be loved or fully satisfied. And so we pine for love and seek it in all the wrong places.

Love may seem mysterious (Fisher, 1992), but it too is subject to the by now familiar social need for both stability and flexibility. If human families are to provide the heterosexual stability needed to socialize human children (Popenoe, 1996), they cannot be entered into lightly or torn asunder too easily (Weiss, 1975). Moreover, if networks of personal relationships are to be resuscitated in the wake of the periodic disasters that periodically afflict the human condition, there must be ways for ruptures to be mended and for new alliances to be contracted. As might be expected, there are. Yet these mechanisms too are a-rational, and often frankly irrational. They do not proceed by coldly ascertaining facts or logically deciding what would make sense. They too are mediated by strong emotions and hence when they are reworked they are reworked emotionally. This does not, however, mean that they are inherently incomprehensible or dysfunctional. In signifies only that the factors that decide who will bond with whom are not intellectually mediated.

To begin with, love relationships are established in courtship processes. The emotional attachments that secure lifelong loyalties do not come into being because they are judiciously deemed to make sense. Willard Waller (1937) described modern mating habits as beginning with a rating-dating ritual. Individuals go out on dates so as to size up each other’s relative attributes. They are looking for someone with whom they feel comfortable, but also someone whose strengths and weaknesses are on a par with their own. In the process, they must swap biographies in a balanced manner so as to introduce each other to their respective worlds. They must then test each other to determine their respective trustworthiness. Because intimacy is dangerous it is essential to evaluate comparative dependability. Next comes the infatuation phase of courtship. If all has gone well up to this point, the two may find themselves enmeshed in an emotional whirlwind. They “feel” in love. They now look toward each other with a reverent desire that is out of proportion with their actual attributes. Freud referred to this as an over-
valuation of the loved object. Paradoxically, what is occurring is at the heart of the bonding process. This is the stage of courtship during which individuals construct personal attachments. It is the means through which they reorganize their emotional objectives and build each other into their respective worlds. Infatuation feels wonderful, but it is more than this; it is a non-rational mechanism for establishing sturdy connections between former strangers. Once effected, this other person becomes special. A multitude of facts about the other, and deductions from these, become beside the point. He or she is now seen through different eyes; eyes that are not seeking empirical accuracy.

After the infatuation phase comes a period of greater emotional balance. There may, for instance, be a lover’s quarrel sparked by defects that were previously invisible. More essential, however, are efforts to negotiate differences. Romantic mythologies may allude to soul mates who are perfectly matched, whereas in real life there are always differences that must be worked through so as to establish the bases for living together. Before the infatuation stage, these discrepancies might have provoked a rupture, but now they command assiduous attention. In the most favorable instances the parties seek balanced solutions from which both may benefit. In this they might make rational calculations, yet they more frequently depend upon intuition and instinct to arrive at a favorable conclusion. True, they listen to each other and clamber after reasonable answers, but there is generally too much happening, a great deal of which derives from unconscious sources, to be handled by exact computations.

Then too, when relationships fall apart, rational calculations dramatically fly out the window. Divorce doubtless has a justifiable reputation for greater irrationality than does even love. When former intimates decide that they no longer love each other, they can be savage in their efforts to separate. The flexibility necessary to rectify dysfunctional attachments is scarcely a matter of civilized reorganization. The emotional bonds fashioned during courtship are too sturdy to be switched off via such intellectual means. As in the earlier attachment phase, these can only be deactivated emotionally. Detachment is at this juncture achieved through a mourning period. The deteriorating love relationship is treated as a loss and is relinquished only after an interval of grief. The steps followed are much the same as those elaborated by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) with respect to death. One of the chief differences, however, is that
uncomplicated deaths may be mourned for about a year, whereas divorce typically takes three years to negotiate. During this interlude the volume of anger expressed, and of vengeance sought, can be anything but rational. Parting couples can be so enraged that they ignore their respective safety in an effort to inflict pain on a departing spouse.

All in all, love and its sequelae are not about being smart. Under the best circumstances people make wise choices, choices that are frequently contingent upon emotional maturity. Under less than ideal circumstances, their decisions can be subverted by myths about love at first sight or idealizations about free love. Since few human beings are perfect and live lives filled with confusion and uncertainty, things typically go awry. Facts and logic may apply, and may be ascertained, but then again they may not. Often a desire to merge overcomes rational thought and people are later forced to repair what biology has impelled them to precipitate. The species continues and makes adjustments to the accidents of existence, but not without anguish that might have been avoided had we been automatons.

**Conclusion**

Irrationality is a universal human phenomenon. It is inevitable. It is also, in part, functional. Complex societies could not maintain their integrity, nor adjust to unexpected demands, were they to rely exclusively on intellectual mechanisms. Cultural and structural machinery is necessary to hold disparate individuals together, but these instruments must also allow for adjustments in how they mesh. While there may hypothetical means of achieving this entirely through rational calculations, this is not how human communities have evolved. None have it found it possible to assimilate all of the facts and deductions necessary to maintain social solidity without resorting to non-rational measures. Indeed too firm an attachment rational mechanisms is itself irrational. It posits the existence of a body of conscious information and objective ratiocination that does exist. In short, it too ignores facts and logic.

No society has yet proven able to survive without cognitive and moral communities, nor without hierarchies, divisions of labor, or personal bonds. Neither has any been able to do without emotions, intuitions, instincts or interpersonal negotiations. These may be inexact, but they make it possible for societies to obtain access to data, and
interpersonal motives, that more conscious mental operations leave out. The issue is rather how to balance the rational, the a-rational and the irrational. Each has a part to play in human sociation, yet what these are is not subject to exact calculation.

Little more can be said than that it behooves us to be aware of the complexity of the human condition. To idealize either the rational, the a-rational or the irrational is to overlook the parts that each of these has to play. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that procedural irrationality may be functional, to ignore its pitfalls places individuals and societies in jeopardy. Irrationality may be inevitable, and is frequently useful, but a complacency in addressing it is dangerous. More sensible is an awareness of where it is likely to arise and self-monitoring efforts to ascertain when it does. These can never be complete, but neither should they be neglected. The reverse would be to acquiesce in a pervasive ignorance, often of that which could be mortally harmful.

References


