

PROBLEMS IN RATIONALITY

An introduction to this issue

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It should be made clear from the outset that 'rational' is not used here — as it was and is in certain philosophical discussions — as opposed to 'empirical'. Admittedly the rationalist-empiricist controversy has been an important one, and still is in its present-day reformulation. But the present issue of this journal is about that "rationality" which both rationalists and empiricists have to share in order to understand one another, or at least in order to understand themselves as different from, say, poets, writers, of advertisements, and demagogues.

Man is said to differ from other animals in that he is rational. Thinking is said to differ from feeling in that it is rational. A disagreement in belief is said to differ from a disagreement in attitude in that it can be resolved by rational means. Theology is said to differ from theosophy in being rational. Analytic philosophy is said to differ from speculative philosophy in being rational. Science is said to differ from politics, religion, metaphysics, (some kinds of) philosophy, *et al.* in being rational. There is no need to give further examples in order to show that the predicate 'rational' is used frequently to express a certain kind of superiority of one thing as opposed to another. The analogue is even more true for the term 'irrational'. Lots of things are labelled irrational without their rational counterpart being mentioned: fascism, capitalism, transcendental meditation, religion, metaphysics, advertising, persuasion, the use of drugs, feelings, ideologies, love, art, etc.

In general, 'irrationality' has a connotation of being on safe ground, of certainty, and of trustworthiness. Hence the connotation of superiority. Hence the cognitive and moral disapproval of whatever is labelled as irrational.

By way of an example we have alluded to the fact that man is sometimes defined as a rational (*differentia specifica*) animal (*genus proximus*), because he is endowed with intelligence and uses it for the determination of his behavior or actions. But it is not in this general sense of "rationality" that the contributors to this issue are interested. If "rationality" simply means that human beings are endowed with intelligence and that they make some use of it in the determination of their behaviour or actions, then there is clearly no problem about rationality. 'Rational' is then a predicate which applies to man in general and, consequently, "irrationality" can simply be identified with absence of intelligence or inability or unwillingness to use intelligence in the determination of behaviour. The meaning of 'rationality' we are discussing in this issue is a more *specific* and a more *critical* one. The concept of rationality should allow us to distinguish critically between specific kinds of thinking, reasoning or arguing, so as to render possible useful distinctions between valid and non-valid thinking or use of intelligence. What are the characteristics of "rational" thinking, of a "rational" use of human intelligence? This is one of the main problems to be discussed in this issue.

Let us now reconsider the definition of man as a rational animal. On closer examination it turns out that the aforementioned characteristics cannot be said to be missing altogether in other animals, at least from a behaviouristic point of view. In this respect the difference between man and other animals seems to reduce to a quantitative one. Furthermore, man is not only characterized by his intellectual capacities and by the use he makes of them. He also differs from other animals with respect to his feelings, attitudes, values, artistic expressions, etc. And there is no *a priori* reason why these characteristics should be considered less important than his intellectual capacities.

It follows that one should not be surprised by a first kind of attack against rationality, launched by anti-rationalists. They point to man's feelings, to his love, to his *erleben*, to his *einfühlen*, to his creativity, to his freedom. They invoke us to live, to love, to believe. They declare reason to be dry, predetermined, strict, narrow. They claim that rationality fails and has always failed, that it is responsible for our being unhappy beings in an unhappy world. They admit that rationality is safe and certain, but contend that it misses the point and leads to nothing but trivial results. Whatever is worth living — love, art, and grandiosity — lies beyond the scope of rationality.

The point made by the anti-rationalist cannot simply be dismissed. One might try to consider art and elitist preoccupation. And one

might try to consider love and grandiosity as having no social importance. But nazism had social importance. And Vietnam was socially important too. And so are Chile, Brazil, Spain, the neo-fascist movement growing throughout the world, dictatorial governments supported by the two most powerful countries, and two thirds of the world dying from hunger. Man's rationality has failed indeed. It has been concerned with economic growth and efficiency instead of with happiness, with atomic bombs and space-labs instead of with food production, with masturbation instead of with social justice.

The point of this anti-rationalist attack on rationality is the idea that the use of reason does not guarantee a happy, satisfactory, and worthwhile life (on the individual level), nor welfare, peace and justice (on the social level). Intellectual or cognitive "rationality" may very well go hand in hand with all kinds of personality-types, of needs structures, of action purposes, of social practices and social structures, even the most egoistic, destructive, anti-humanitarian. To refute this attack of the anti-rationalists it would be necessary to demonstrate that rationality is not only possible and desirable on the cognitive level, but also on the level of values, norms, ideals, purposes, and goals of action. This seems to be a very complicated and delicate problem. Is there such a thing as *ethical rationality*, a rationality which would not only apply to our kind of thinking but which would enable us to organize our patterns of life, our actions, our economic, social and political structures in ways that could be objectively justified as "superior", or "better", or "most desirable"? This problem will be discussed in this issue. But, even if attempts at defining rationality on the ethical level should fail, rationalists can make another point against the anti-rationalists' attack. It is clear that a minimally rational person will consider the activities of other persons and his own relation to other persons as highly relevant for his own rationality — and this irrespective of the ontological status he assigns to such persons. As a consequence, rationality is also considered as relevant to the modalities of communication. More precisely, rationality is said to maximize the efficiency of communicative processes. Here the rationalist seems able to make a good point. In his discussion with the anti-rationalist he insists that he is only prepared to consider arguments that he accepts as legitimate, i.e. rational arguments. This kind of problem is discussed at length by Yehosua Bar-Hillel in his "A prerequisite for rational philosophical discussion" (in *Language and logic*, Reidel, 1962), which bears on the discussion between analytic philosophers on the one hand and their speculative colleagues on the other hand.

Writes Bar-Hillel : "But I am ready to listen and argue with him only if the (meta-) language, in which he explains to me his reasons for challenging my standards, itself complies with these standards". And also "Should they contend, however, that for intrinsic reasons such a metalanguage is not up to its purpose, then this would now indeed mean either the end of the conversation, or else the whole issue will just be pushed one step higher the hierarchy of philosophical metalanguages".

Unfortunately, the above arguments have no effect on the straightforward anti-rationalist. The anti-rationalist is only impressed by them as long as he were concerned appearing rational on the metalevel. But an open anti-rationalist does not do so. He will point to the importance of mere feeling or at best to the importance of feeling evoked by the power of linguistic utterances (mystics, Dr. Goebbles, or those who want to get their public to assert "Wir sind entschlossen, aber wir wissen nicht wozu ! "). This is the second kind of attack against rationality.

A third attack is more challenging than the former ones in that it comes out of the rationalist camp itself. The roots of this attack are already present in the early years of the "Wiener Kreis" : large parts of what was previously considered the rational discipline called philosophy were rejected as meaningless. The schizophrenia of the old English empiricists such as bishop Berkeley was a welcome environment for this part of the logico-positivistic insights — but unfortunately not for all other parts. Alfred Ayer went on as far as to claim, on the formal level, that norms and values could not be handled by logic and, on the content level, that the acceptance of norms and values was governed by the kind of preference that governs adherence to a certain football team. (We heard Sir Alfred repeat this a few years ago on a program on Dutch television). Stevenson translated the insight into the difference between disagreement in belief and disagreement in attitude. And Irving Copi gave an important place to this distinction in his best-seller *An Introduction to logic*. In this climate came publications by Thomas S. Kuhn, Norwood Russel Hanson and others. Their statements about the evolution and structure of science differed on major points from the by then orthodox logico-empiricist view. The philosophical world — rather, the non-sleeping part of it — was somewhat shaken and accused them of introducing irrational elements in the picture of scientific knowledge. Kuhn and Hanson disclaimed this. But before people became convinced, others jumped on the irrationalist bandwagon, Paul Feyerabend not in the last place. In his "Against method..." (in Radner & Winokur, eds., *Minnesota Studies*, IV) he

reincarnated Eugène Delacroix's naked-breasted" Liberty leading the people", bearing on his floating standard: Hegel, witchcraft, and Rose Luxemburg.

If we leave aside this standard for a moment, Feyerabend is not a unique case. One of the contributors to the present issue, Freddy Verbruggen, tried to show in his "The attitude theory ..." (*this journal*, 3, 1965) that Stevensonian disagreements in belief are based on deeper disagreements in attitude; that a disagreement is a disagreement in belief (hence can be solved) only if both parties agree about the rules of the game — call it science or what have you. If this is correct, then every belief rests on an equally unjustified basis. It might be objected that this conclusion is arrived at within a specific conceptual framework, and would not necessarily be reached in other ones. But leaving aside the worth of the framework, is the conclusion itself implausible? Do we not constantly refer to "science" and other sets of "rational activities" without questioning the underlying presuppositions and, perhaps, prejudices? Are we fully aware of the rules of the game called science? And if not, why should one believe that this game is more rational than others?

Up to now we have seen attacks on rationality by, first of all, anti-rationalists; and secondly, by members of the Anglosaxon rationalist camp itself. But this rationalist camp includes only a part of those who might be called rationalists. One school that has had an important influence in Europe is the "Frankfurter Schule". Its members question the "rationality" of the positive sciences, because of their presuppositions, their epistemological and methodological restrictions and premisses, their theoretical and practical aims, and their applications. These are said to rest upon ideological and political purposes and aims: the unlimited exploitation, domination and manipulation of nature and of man in the service of particular, undemocratic economical, social and political interests. The functionality of scientific rationality for such morally unacceptable aims and purposes makes this rationality in itself "irrational", according to the authors of the "Frankfurter Schule". They are opposed to every attempt to define 'rationality' on a purely cognitive (epistemological, methodological, intellectual) level, unlinked with considerations about the practical (moral, political, social, economical) functions and uses of that cognitive rationality. For them, "rationality" implies some conception about the historical evolution of human nature, and the use of reason for organizing and controlling society in order to adapt it to the fundamental characteristics of human nature. Consequently, the definition of "true" rationality presupposes a normative anthropology and a social

philosophy as its reference system. And this anthropology and social philosophy cannot simply be derived from the data of the positive sciences, nor can they be constructed on the basis of scientific modes of thinking alone. Rationality asks for some legitimate form of creative, imaginary, inventive thinking about human nature and historical evolution, and for some legitimate mode of values- and purposes-choice.

Although it cannot be denied that the authors of the Frankfurter Schule use an extremely confused language and that they do not spell out a clear and 'operational' alternative to scientific rationality, it should be admitted that they have pointed to real problems concerning the definition of rationality, and that their view is directly linked with one of the most dominant and influential conceptions of "rationality" in the history of western philosophical thought, namely that which was most clearly presented by the rationalists of the Enlightenment and carried on by German Idealism (Hegel) and Marxism.

This issue is a result of the activities of a group in the University of Ghent philosophy department. Apart from the contributors to this issue, Karel Boullart, Marc De Mey, and Benoît Angelet have also contributed to the discussions within the group. Among the papers discussed were earlier versions of the present articles by Fernand Vandamme and Dirk Batens, as well as a very long paper on the Frankfurter Schule by H. Van den Enden. It goes without saying that the contributors to the present issue do not intend to spell out a definitive solution to all problems concerning rationality, or even to all the problems mentioned within this introduction. We only intend to present some contributions to the clarification and solution of some of the problems connected with the important issue of rationality.