

Justin E. H. SMITH, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason*. Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019, 344 p., 16.2 × 23.6 cm, ISBN 978-0-69118-966-6

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Justin E. H. SMITH, **Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason**. Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2019, 344 p., 16.2 × 23.6 cm, ISBN 978-0-69118-966-6.

In *Process and Reality* (1929), Alfred North Whitehead stated that human beings are “only intermittently rational”; we are “merely liable to rationality,” and the broad claim that “all men are rational” is “palpably false.”¹ Even longer ago, Plato noted in the *Republic* that the rational part of human nature, whether on the level of society or in just one individual, is its smallest part (the “true pilot” who will never have the opportunity to guide the ship; though reason is capable of leading our less-rational parts, this is neither obvious nor often true).²

Yet our rationality has been embraced by many other writers and thinkers, who pride themselves in their ability to reason and even elevate this power to an almost divine status, confident in its power to save us from the forces which threaten us. Carl Sagan, the American astronomer and popularizer of science, wrote the following in the book before he died:

I have a foreboding of an America in my children’s or grandchildren’s time – when the United States is a service and information economy; when nearly all the manufacturing industries have slipped away to other countries; when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to set their own agendas or knowledgeably question those in authority; when, clutching our crystals and nervously consulting our horoscopes, our critical faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what’s true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness.³

Sagan’s sense of urgency is clear: reason, the scientific method, and the embrace of logic are humankind’s salvation; the forces of superstition and irrationality spell doom for our world and all of humankind’s enterprises. Sagan’s point of view eliminates the middle ground (one is either on the side of reason or against it). But Sagan builds his case, and never loses sight of a single, simple rule: follow the evidence. This keeps him clear and focused, and never allows him to lose sight of his point.

For a number of reasons, Justin E.H. Smith’s recent book, *Irrationality: A History of the Dark Side of Reason* (2019) is the antithesis of Carl Sagan’s book. For one thing, Smith is less than convinced in the power of reason to save humankind; unlike Sagan, he does not see rationality as the antidote to irrationality or ignorance. Rather, Smith sees irrationality as the *result* of reason, as much as reason emerges from irrationality (take the titular candle from Sagan’s book; rather than a light eliminating the shadows of ignorance, Smith sees irrationality as the shadow cast by the candle).

The relationship the two share is dialectical, rather than necessarily adversarial. Each one contains its opposite, and when pushed far enough, one can devolve into

1. Alfred North WHITEHEAD, *Process and Reality*, ed. David R. GRIFFIN and Donald W. SHERBURNE, NY, New York, Free Press, 1978, p. 79; originally published 1929.

2. PLATO, *The Republic*, 2nd ed., tr. Alan BLOOM, New York NY, Basic Books, 1991, 489a; translation originally published 1961.

3. Carl SAGAN. *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, London, Headline Book Publishing, 1996, pp. 25-26.

the other (an easy example might be Nazi Germany: technologically advanced, but promoting and based upon an irrational, hate-fueled ideology), and being too intent on the pursuit of reason can lead to its loss.

One's approach to, and understanding of, an idea or phenomenon might affect what can be understood as "rational"; a particularly interesting example concerns dreams, to which Smith devotes his discussion in the third chapter. Smith contrasts three examples. The Iroquois people, who have long believed dreams provided wisdom and guidance against the uncertainties of waking life (pp. 74-75), while Rene Descartes saw dreams as deceptions (hallucinations or lies generated by the mind, p. 76). Finally, in the nineteenth century, Smith tells of how Sigmund Freud regarded dreams as a means to a new kind of truth about the self: a window into the unconscious mind (pp. 77-78). Clearly, the idea that there is truth to be gleaned from the study of dreams may be both rational and irrational, and the nature of that truth can vary in kind, as well.

In addition to the above-mentioned chapter on dreams, with its numerous examples, Smith discusses a diverse (even bewildering) number of other topics. Chapters 1 and 2 question the very nature/importance/presence of reason in so-called rational societies; examples cited include a discussion of classical Greece, which Smith describes as less a bastion of reason or democratic values than a collection of what he describes as "strange cults" (p. 14), and the founding of America and France after their Revolutions, where the rights of slaves were denied even while the era's famous Declarations (America's 1776 Declaration of Independence, as well as France's 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen) proclaimed the equality of all (and, indeed, those very words were penned by a slave-owner, Thomas Jefferson) (pp. 11, 167). Smith's argument here is that efforts to be rational tend to hold blind spots (irrational behavior always accompanies rational behavior). In fact, societies that pride themselves on being rational are perhaps even more vulnerable to irrational oversights, confirmation bias, etc.

In the animal world, we can observe complex, intelligent behavior, unaccompanied by deliberation (animals may find easy, otherwise-clear solutions to problems/puzzles humans will spend a great deal of time contemplating); Smith stops here to consider whether being rational is preferable, or if it, in fact, blinds us to the obvious (pp. 56-60).

Chapter 3's discussion of dreams (and perceived ideas of what, exactly, counts as "truth") leads to Chapter 4's discussion of art, a non-necessarily rational product of human effort and culture that is enjoyed and appreciated, despite its often irrational nature (an aspect of art that can even give it its appeal).

This discussion leads to Chapter 5's discussion of pseudoscience, a topic on which much of Sagan's *The Demon-Haunted World*, referenced throughout this particular review, was focused. However, while Sagan was dismayed by the human tendency to believe in the irrational (especially in a time when information is so readily available), Smith is actually more interested in our tendency to rationalize the absurd (as he is well-aware of the power and prevalence of confirmation bias, something to which he admits we are all vulnerable, pp. 66, 69).

Smith's focus in this chapter is on groups who defend creation science (the idea that the Book of Genesis is literally true, and that the earth is only 6000 years old), anti-vaxxers, and flat-earthers. The efforts of these to prove the irrational "rational,"

Smith says, is at odds with past individuals, such as Tertullian (*Credo quia absurdum*: “I believe because it is absurd”), Kierkegaard (who understood that faith, being faith, could never be proven, p. 144), and the Romantics of the nineteenth century (who rejected scientific explanations in order to embrace a living vision of the world infused with magic, beauty, and passion, p. 168). Smith finds the present-day insistence on being perceived as “rational” interesting, for it also makes these worldviews twice as absurd, while suggesting a present-day fear of being “irrational” that did not exist in the past.

The remaining four chapters of the book contain a number of interesting examples and discussions—on the internet, and its polarizing effect on communities (in spite of the vast amounts of information to which it provides access); the myth of the Enlightenment (which revisits topics discussed in Chapters 1-2); jokes (which, different examples aside, covers the same ground as the earlier chapter on art); and death (which discusses Socrates’ acceptance of his fate and the reasonability of his reasons to do so, as well as Smith’s musings on his own mortality). But it is at this point that the book becomes somewhat unfocused. The best part of the book is the first half, Chapters 1-5, as each of these lays the groundwork for the discussion which comes after. By the time the internet is discussed in Chapter 6, Smith’s chapters have stopped building on one another, becoming a series of loosely connected essays rather than a clearly connected series of arguments.

One other way Smith’s *Irrationality* contrasts with Sagan’s book becomes obvious the further one reads: the overall lack of focus and clear direction. With the multitude of examples each chapter offers, Smith’s aim for each chapter often becomes obscured. One might talk of missing the forest for all the trees; Smith’s examples become so numerous, and each one so interesting, that his actual topic may be easily forgotten. Sagan’s *The Demon-Haunted World*, meanwhile, keeps things focused, and so losing sight of the topic is never a problem (even if Sagan’s own faith in the power of reason is at odds with the points Smith makes in this book).

To conclude, it must first be said that this book, like other of Smith’s books, is interesting and engaging; it is his overabundance of examples and lack of a clear direction for each of its chapters that prevents it from being a more effective discussion. However, Smith also adds an important response to those who would champion reason as humankind’s hope and salvation, reminding those who advocate progress, placing reason before humankind’s other aspects and abilities, not to get ahead of themselves.

To sum up, Smith’s book is interesting and engaging, but he spends more time than he needs to make his point, and his examples and tangents are not always an effective means of argumentation. A reader might prefer something a bit more focused and concise. Nevertheless, the book serves as an important prompt to help us recognize the complexity of human understanding/interaction, and a sobering reminder of how easy it is to be blind to our own irrationality (especially if we pride ourselves for this fact). This is a lesson everyone could benefit from, and so Smith’s book is a readable contribution to a very important discussion.

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