

A Rationale for Irrationality, Based on Breuer's "Momentous Discovery"

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Abstract

This paper starts by reviewing how little we understand, rationally, about oxygen and about the way we breathe generally, and how we moved from using gills to lungs. The central flaw in **2) scientific reasoning** is that overinsistence on tangible "solutions" has led to neglect of the vital distinguishing feature of homo sapiens—the mind. Once **3) rational reasoning** is brought centre stage, some of its intrinsic defects are reviewed. Using these points, **4) irrational reasoning** is then considered, especially in relation to other contrary, or apparently uncooperative characteristics. **5) Breuer's breakthrough** is presented as shining a brilliant light on where irrationality itself comes from—and stresses the inability of the sufferer to recall the horrendous event which induced it in the first place. Further, it points to rehabilitating the medical word "cure". More controversially, **6) irrational psychiatry** points out that the leading psychiatric textbook attempts, quite explicitly, to distance itself from the very existence of mind itself, with predictable dire sequelae. In conclusion, the role deceit and lies play in **7) irrational planning** is briefly reviewed.

Keywords

Reasoning, The Mind, Intent, Healthcare, Irrationality, A Healthier Psychiatry, War

1. Background

"BE REASONABLE!" Even though this is such an everyday and widely used admonition, it may seem odd to apply it to philosophy, especially when tackling

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controversial topics, such as this one. It is certainly commonplace—but its profundity is too easily overlooked. So what, precisely, does it mean? It's a bit like breathing—we take it for granted—until it starts going awry.

We all need oxygen, but it has to be fresh. Stale air is of as little value to us, as stale reasoning. It's difficult, on the face of it, to say why—until it happens. Yet, if we err with either breathing or reasoning—then the consequences can indeed be painful.

Take for example, our everyday conversations. However trivial, we expect them to follow a thread. One point follows another, generally in a kind of regular pattern. When they don't, when we lose the sequence—then we sit up and take notice. And if the breach or interruption is major, then so is the consternation which follows from it. All this happens almost without our knowing it, certainly with only the vaguest notion of what either reasoning or breathing, actually is.

And generally, the absence of this sort of fundamental philosophic inquiry doesn't trouble us—we continue to breathe in and out, and to think things through, without paying serious attention to what either one of these vital human activities entails—which is probably just as well, because to do so, opens whole chasms of elusivity, enough to swallow even the most intrepid.

Pursuing the analogy further, it is often presumed that because we now know about oxygen, then we understand breathing. Again, this presumption is generally reasonable—but in reality, it only takes us so far—it is in no way definitive, or absolute. We like to think that “chemicals”, such as oxygen, are somehow more substantial than “thought”—but this again, is only partly true.

Here's just such a thread which can all too rapidly become utterly contorted—we breathe air, because we are land animals. Our evolutionary ancestors were fish, they had gills not lungs, they extracted their oxygen from seawater—and since there is significantly less there, than in air, we, in common with other terrestrials, think quicker and with more depth.

At every twist and turn in our evolution, we find gaping holes, even more ubiquitous than Darwin's “missing links”—and none of them remotely easy to understand. Each and every one of them is either unknowable, unimaginable, or even unforeseeable, an especially hard feature to swallow for a species that loves (and indeed needs) to forward plan. So much so that we, as a species, face a choice—we can either confabulate, pretend, or we can marvel. I commend the latter.

We reason. We plan ahead. And we need oxygen to do so. But lack of this vital gas is not the only thing which goes wrong. There is a rationale for irrationality, but, in common with all thinking, all philosophy, it too can become too complex too quickly. This paper sets out to plod slowly enough—while still remaining reasonable.

2. Scientific Reasoning

There is no doubt that the advent of “Science” changed the way we interact with our surroundings. Checking our presuppositions against what actually happens

(e.g., by scientific experimentation) sharpens our perceptions, and permits our forward planning to leap ahead in unprecedented ways.

But it too carries a downside—just as the “discovery” of oxygen would seem at first to “solve” the problem of breathing, it only does so to a limited extent. It is, of course, of inestimable value in healthcare—oxygen can be concentrated, and supplied to apnoeics in a focused and curative manner. But to suppose that this resolves the medical problem for all time, is an error. What if, for example, there were a less obvious factor which is a precursor to apnoea and which could eliminate the need for additional oxygen entirely? What then? Would it be given the time of day, and evaluated like any other therapy? Or not.

Supposing the matter to be closed, because it is “scientific”, can induce a different sort of ignorance—an unwillingness to see what hasn’t already been seen. It is helpful to label this as “obsolete-data”, or more colloquially—“yesterday’s-news”—a point which gathers more significance in a later section.

And this is the burden of this paper—our understanding of breathing has gone leaping ahead, such that when it goes wrong, we have much better ways of coping. Our understanding of irrationality on the other hand, has become mired in excessive “scientism”. There is too much wishful thinking, not enough human perspective. The progress that has been made in physical medicine, for instance, tends to colour our expectations of similar advances in reasonings. But the two are also afflicted by the same basic limitation—neither of them can escape their inherent elusivity.

It happens that though oxygen was unknown for millennia, we have breathed it ever since we emerged from the sea. So, even before it acquired this Greek-derived label, it worked. We use it in our everyday life, without ever knowing anything of its complexities. It happens to be involved in intricate electron transfers, and in acidity control, to say nothing of a type of internal combustion, oxidising (or “burning”) our carbohydrate fuel, among other things.

This sounds wonderfully complex, and alluring to the scientific mind, but it also opens huge chasms of elusivity and ignorance, chasms we’re unlikely ever to bridge. Nor do we need to. This is where the thread of the discussion can become so distorted, it breaks, and the coherence of the topic lost.

By appearing to plod in this way, I hope to keep that thread intact. I’m not saying all Science is wrong—what I am saying is we should make doubly sure that we know what helps, and beware that the complexities of the subject do not overwhelm. This is the downside to scientific reasoning—we assume it bridges gaps we cannot even begin to understand. Yes, push our understanding forward, as far as it can reasonably go—but have a care—life around us (to say nothing of the Uncertainty Principle), can take us beyond human imaginings. And if it does, it would be tragic to lose what is already well within our grasp.

Nor is this a mere academic or theoretical point. Non-medical readers will be amazed, and I hope shocked, to find that the central entity that is currently being obliterated in exactly this way, is nothing less than the human mind itself. It is the

explicit editorial policy of the predominant global psychiatric textbook, to remove the very term “mental” from its title (see Section 6 below). This borders on the lunatic—and the sequelae are, unsurprisingly, catastrophic—all because the mind and its machinations are intrinsically intangible.

This is scientific reasoning turned to farce. The philosophy of healthcare might seem a tepid topic—but when it emasculates sensible discussion of the one quality that distinguishes homo sapiens from all other species on this remarkable planet—then something in philosophy is seriously amiss. Pretending that such discussion would be too “unscientific”, strikes one as being far from “reasonable”, and in my view, justifies the label “irrational”—which no amount of scientific reasoning can rescue.

On strictly philosophic grounds, suggesting that someone should stop breathing, because we don’t know all there is to know about oxygen, makes as little sense as doing the same about the mind. This is especially ironic, because the one feature of the mind which trumps all others, is its very fluidity, its intrinsic shapelessness—in a word, its elusivity. We shall never know the boundaries of our mental world—thank goodness, because being infinitely *boundless* is the central and indeed ineffable quality of the mind, the one we rely on both for our health, and indeed for our very survival.

3. Rational Reasoning

As we penetrate deeper into these elusivities, first of the rational mind, and later of the irrational, it is crucial to keep matters as simple as the topic will allow. And here the key is to start with the obvious, the everyday, the easily observed by one and all. Take driving a car. We can see this just by looking out the window. So far, so simple.

But watch what happens when the driver changes her mind. Of a sudden she slows down or speeds up, as circumstances change. She even turns to the right or the left, as the whim takes her. This doesn’t depend on believing one set of theories about the mind, or even that such a thing exists. It is so commonplace that none of us throw up our hands and exclaim—what’s happening? The driver is no longer going where she originally intended or planned. Something has happened. But this doesn’t depend on what you believe, what you’ve been taught—it happens—you either see it, observe it, and accept it—or you are out of touch.

This everyday occurrence is something that, as with oxygen just now, we take in our stride. We simply assume not only that the driver “changed her mind”, but that this is entirely “normal”, and should be accepted as such. It happens. It happens so often that it appears “ordinary”. And yet, in philosophic terms, it is extraordinary. For a start you wouldn’t find a computer doing this. Once programmed in a particular direction, the digital machine ploughs steadily and remorsefully on, until it reaches its long pre-programmed end. That’s what it’s for. If it doesn’t do this, then we send it for repair, if not for de-bugging.

Unhappily, this has been erroneously applied to thought. It is commonly as-

sumed that a line of reasoning which goes, say from “A” to “B”, or even from $2 + 2 = 4$ —that this is entirely characteristic of human cognition. We assume from this abstract example that any line of reasoning which falls short of this pristine sample, is “unscientific” and should not be tolerated in any sensible discussion.

Here then is another of those breaks in the thread. Anything which doesn’t comply with this “computer-like” perfection is dismissed as speculation, subjective notions, and not to be taken either seriously or universally. And yet, as with oxygen, unless we put this matter centre stage, we actively reduce our longevity, among other things.

Thus the commonest fallacy about human thought, is that it is 100% logical, generally pre-determined, and outside the user’s control. So let’s put this into its wider context. Breathing is entirely personal—no one can breathe for you. Once it stops, so do you.

Equally, thinking is the same. You can change your mind, as easily as any car-driver, if not more so. I cannot resist quoting John [Maynard Keynes \(1924\)](#), at this point. He notably responded to one questioner by saying “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”

Just imagine—I am having to cite an eminent economist to support an argument, to keep the thread intact, concerning the characteristics of the human mind. First that it exists, despite what a colloquium of medical experts alleges. And second that you, me, and every living human, can change it, whenever it needs changing.

Of course, there are exceptions—but it is unwise to let these rule the everyday. We do do things by “instinct”, by force of habit, even by unseen powerful fears, as we address next—but to discount the Freedom of the Will, on the grounds that it doesn’t always do what we want is as myopic, philosophically, as refusing to inhale, because oxygen isn’t 100% explicable.

In an earlier paper ([Johnson, 2017](#)), I labelled this, “intent”—a conception without which the legal profession would be as bereft as the psychiatric one currently is (see [Whitaker & Cosgrove, 2015](#)). Latterly I have merged “intent” with “agency”, the ability of each of us to do, or to implement, or to act as “agent”. Here again, I am plodding, in an effort to keep the thread intact.

4. Irrational Reasoning

Keeping the topic as simple, as obvious, even as objective as possible—let’s continue with the car-driver. Picture the everyday scene in a traffic-control centre. Here you can see screen upon screen of fleets of cars streaming out, with their ruby tail lights glowing behind them. Traffic flows smoothly.

If you think that this is too obvious to bring to a challenging philosophical discussion, I would invite you to think again. Philosophically speaking, any such smoothness would be quite impossible without every single one of these multitude of drivers being sentient. They see. They deduce. And they change. This is what thinking does. As they continue to breathe, so they continue to respond to changes

in their immediate surroundings—this enables them to think (using oxygen), and to avoid hitting the car in front, or to the side (using their minds).

The philosophic miracle is that this works far more often than it does not. This, in my view, is what thinking, what reasoning is for. It is primarily for cooperating, for interacting with changes in the environment which happen all by themselves, but which we cope with by rational reasoning.

If you doubt this, just bring to mind what happens when thinking is impaired, as for example, with car drivers who take drugs or alcohol—mayhem.

From which it is not too challenging to re-set the dial on reasonings—they are there to initiate, indeed to enable, our cooperation. Doing things sensibly, rationally, thinking things through—this is what our mind is primarily for. Just as our lungs breathe in and out for us, so our minds keep reasoning things for us—unpacking for us, how we can enlist our fellows to cooperate, to socialise, to get on as smoothly as flowing traffic does.

The converse of using reasoning to socialise, is that when we meet obstructions, unsocial behaviours—then we react adversely. We expect that rational behaviour wins through, that it makes “sense” so that things run smoother, that traffic flows. But the real world around us demurs.

One of the classic occasions was Pythagoras and the non-squaring of the circle. Instead of allowing this Ancient Greek to plan ahead and predict the length of a circumference merely from knowing its radius, our uncooperative world decreed that this ratio would never be as simple as that between a hypotenuse and its triangular companions.

Pythagoras was duly annoyed—he termed this discrepancy “irrational” a form of unreason. And rightly so. The term has stuck. It could also usefully be applied to the Uncertainty Principle—an equally awkward fact of reality, which degrades our quest for Certainty, for sense, for rationality in the challenging world we find ourselves in. Again our obdurate world has decreed you can either know where an electron is, or where it is going—never 100% of both at the same time. It is hard to think up a more contrary “roadblock” in our path to writing down the fundamentals of our universe in ever simpler mathematical terms. The Uncertainty Principle merits the same label as π (Pi)—irrational—labelling it so, should benefit us all, by warning of other errors science tempts us into.

This is irrationality, as attributed to inanimate things. A useful parallel to the multitude of labels which are commonly applied to similar curmudgeonly behaviour on the part of other humans, and occasionally, ourselves. Here “irrational” is relabelled as “having a chip on the shoulder”, or a “quirk”, even a “dirty trick”. Somehow the people we are dealing with turn oppositional, just as the electron does. It, and they, know what you want, and yet persist in supplying the opposite. It’s almost as if they deliberately want to break the thread of a discourse—not because this helps either them or us, but because that’s the way their current reasoning drives them—they can’t think straight enough to stop themselves being obnoxious. Irrationality in practice.

Reverting to our car driver, irrationality is not as if she ceases driving—no, all the normal cognitive apparatus is in full working order. But what has happened is that the thread has been diverted. It's as if, from the car driver's viewpoint, a road-block sign has appeared ahead which demands to be observed, without any clear idea of what that might be. As if blinded by oncoming headlights, or glare, or other factors which render normal reasonings inoperative—or inoperative in a normal rational, i.e. cooperative and social, manner.

Philosophically speaking, this is not an ordinary issue of “incomprehension”, as if the sufferer were suddenly talking in Serbo-Croat, or some other language we had never heard of. No, this sort of deliberate muddying the water is far too common to be unknown. In fact, there is a clear pattern here, a clearer determination to proceed on a path which makes sense to the sufferer, *but to no one else*. Their determination is that they are right, and everyone else therefore wrong—a striking departure from rational reasoning.

The essence of cognition, rational cognition, is that there *is* a thread, at least one the speaker/thinker can see, and is trying to follow, as discussed. Yet in irrational reasoning, this thread is broken. And here, allied with Freud, Breuer won through. He enlightened Freud, who freely acknowledged Breuer's breakthrough—to which we now come.

5. Breuer's Breakthrough

Keeping this as simple as we can, one way of looking at this is to imagine that when we talk or think, we are negotiating our way around objects in our mental furniture. We posit such and such a circumstance, and then think up ways around. It's morning time—where's breakfast?

Now, Breuer's breakthrough, his *momentous discovery* in Freud's terms (Freud, 1896), was to respect the person's ability to think straight—and to light on the one clear reason why he or she, no longer did so. The key is that since thinking is “blocked”, the sufferer is denied the opportunity to see this for themselves, and thereby to correct it as they would any other thinking error. Irrational reasoning amounts to blocked reasoning.

What Breuer did was to link this blockage with an earlier dreaded “catastrophe”, which could not be brought back into consciousness—it was too “dangerous” to think. Not only did the road sign prevent our driver continuing on the path previously decided upon—the very sign itself in addition to being illegible, was rendered 100% invisible, to (and by) the sufferer themselves. The more you, or they, pressed the issue—the more the irrationality increased. The harder you pushed through the front door, the thicker the blockages grew. No wonder “psychopaths”, and a whole host of psychosomatics are deemed untreatable, even incurable—which they are, unless you grasp Breuer's insight.

For what Breuer and Freud discovered was that legions of their patients with all manner of mental distress—simply could not bring some fearsome event from their past into full view, or as they said, into full consciousness.

They further uncovered that once these past scenarios could gently be brought into full view, i.e., by bringing them up-to-date—that this apparently simple action would *cure* them.

Freud, aged 40, knew this (Freud, 1896). It was his crown jewels, or as he preferred, his Caput Nili, the Head of the Nile. He sums it up in a single pithy sentence, as follows:

“With our patients, those memories [*of the dire childhood event*] are never conscious; but we CURE them of their hysteria by **transforming their unconscious memories of the infantile scenes into conscious ones.**”

In the original German, this appears as:

“Bei unseren Kranken sind diese Erinnerungen niemals bewußt; wir HEILEN sie aber von ihrer Hysterie, indem wir ihnen die unbewußten Erinnerungen der Infanzilszenen in bewußte verwandeln.”

When Freud himself was aged 81, he admitted that he could half-see that he still had a residual fear of his father (Freud, 1937). Sadly for us all, he was never given enough trustworthy emotional support to apply Breuer’s epochal insight—so that he could agree with the rest of us, that fearing a man who had already been dead for 40 years is *irrational*. And further, that this thinking-anomaly could readily be cured, by “transforming” this horrendous memory, into today’s world, where it is simply out-of-date—yesterday’s news, obsolete data.

In simple terms, Freud had failed to prevent himself extending his childhood emotional strategies, into adulthood—where they are grossly inappropriate. To see this, he needed to keep the original fear, or terror, at bay long enough—until then, the catastrophic happening itself, simply blocks its own recall—it remains where it always was—untouched, unresolved because unthought-through.

This “breakthrough” too often proves too simple for many—despite considerable solid clinical (including video) evidence being regularly available, including on the web (Johnson, 2023a). But these are practical points that need addressing at length elsewhere, (Johnson, 2018). Here we move on, into even more turbulent waters.

6. Irrational Psychiatry

The accusation that the leading psychiatric textbook of today, with global impact, is grossly misleading from a philosophical viewpoint, is likely to gain little traction among those trained in its precepts. However, as any high school student of philosophy will tell you, its philosophical distortions are so blatant, they only need a dispassionate observer to unpack.

These points are continued in more detail elsewhere (Johnson, 2021). Here we quote from page xxi, of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV, 1994)

“...Although this volume is titled the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

Mental Disorders, the term mental disorder UNFORTUNATELY implies a distinction between ‘mental’ disorders and ‘physical’ disorders that is a **reductionistic anachronism of mind/body dualism**. A compelling literature documents that there is much ‘physical’ in ‘mental’ disorders and much ‘mental’ in ‘physical’ disorders. The problem raised by the term ‘mental’ disorders has been much clearer than its solution, and, UNFORTUNATELY, the term persists in the title of DSM-IV because **we have not found an appropriate substitute...**” [*emphases added.*]

Given that most are already uncomfortable about the mysteries of the mind, how can it possibly help to serve up such fuzzy and technical words? Where’s the clarity in—“*a reductionistic anachronism of mind/body dualism*”? An *anachronism* is always bad, and coupled with the opaque *mind/body dualism* this can only befuddle the uninitiated. Who is robust enough to call such an entrenched cabal to account? Sadly the medical profession, and its many medical editors, don’t take kindly to being shown the error of their ways—where can our remedy come from?

Here is an editorial board composed of psychiatrists who actually complain that you cannot write a textbook of psychiatry without using the term “mind”. They repeat this complaint by using the word “UNFORTUNATELY”—twice They find no need to mention “mind” again—so who is there can challenge collegiate psychiatrists who pontificate that the mind doesn’t exist, or at least it doesn’t matter? Much depends on this. Can philosophy rescue us?

7. Irrational Planning

The irrational mind is like a stunted limb. We can all see our arms and legs—where these are grossly deformed, the loss is obvious to one and all. But because the mind is intangible, when it can no longer perform its central function, then even this disability can remain essentially invisible, however gross.

Worse, Freud and Breuer’s discovery closes the circle—since the afflicted person is utterly unable to recall the awesome event which initially disabled their thinking, this forecloses any sensible rationale for irrationality. It would have helped if today’s leading psychiatric authority had admitted that the mind exists—this would then have allowed a rational discussion of what it is for.

However, as throughout this paper, every effort is made to keep the thread as simple as possible, especially since, at this point, it is prone to fracture on impact with the reader’s personal views—let’s therefore revert to the car driver.

We have established that she can change her mind—either as to what her final destination might be, or how to avoid hitting the car in front. But next is her ability to plan ahead. The route she initially chose, indeed the amount of fuel left in her tank (or battery)—all these require forward planning—get these wrong, and her destination is not only deferred, but may be rendered beyond reach forever.

Now, in order to ensure even a modicum of success in forward planning, you have to ensure that the data you start with is reliable. How much fuel is there left? Deceit or faulty data at this stage will risk the whole venture. Accordingly, if you

find that an individual lies at every juncture, then you can safely assume that their forward planning will be equally unreliable. Their objectives, their stated goals will be as suspect as the sub-factual or fictional basis from which they start.

Now where, in the human life-cycle, does it seem to pay to distort reality? Let's start with a 5-year-old. Here we have "pretends" in full flood. Fairytales are far from being frowned on—indeed along with nursery rhymes, they are everyday fare. More, daydreams of being king or queen of the world are so frequent that they appear entirely normal. "If I ruled the world" trips off an infant's tongue, as if it were the most normal expectation you could have. To the child, this is not branded "dishonesty" (or tyranny)—indeed, it might even be encouraged as creativity.

However, should adversity be introduced into the child's life, then daydreams and the ability to leave behind a painful frightening reality, in favour of a fictional world more under the child's control, could well become irresistible, even unavoidable—none of us is super(wo)man.

Move to an even more devastating scenario, and unreality becomes not only more desirable, but inescapable—and this, in essence, is what Josef Breuer's momentous discovery was. The retreat into a friendlier (though unreal) world pushes the worst child-catastrophes out of mind, out of consciousness—indeed out of mental consideration altogether.

This is the key to irrationality. It pays the sufferer to not-think, to not-remember, to non-sense. Irrational thought is thus self-perpetuating. Until the infantile scenes can safely be brought into full consciousness, they are destined to persist. And so remain undetoxified. Conversely, once brought up-to-date, they can justify Freud's 1896 use of that unfamiliar word—CURE.

Unhappily for us all, Freud's fear of his father persisted till he was over 80—it could have been removed at any time—but only if he had been in receipt of enough reassurance, enough emotional support, enough trustworthiness to recall its child-origins—just as he and Breuer had prescribed together in the early 1890s. Sadly for him, and for us, he never did. So, there this partly hidden fear remained, as did far too many other mental tribulations. Indeed, the scope is unexpectedly wide, as indicated by the phrase *Friendless Childhoods Explain War* (Johnson, 2023b).

Had Freud's very own personal "*unconscious memories of his infantile scene*", been evaporated by being brought up to date in the manner he proudly presented to the world in 1896—then this rationale for irrationality, based on Breuer's "*momentous discovery*", need not have waited 129 years. How long before we can awaken a recalcitrant medical profession to revitalise Freud's 1896 confidence, and also deploy that welcome but so far tragically underused term—cure?

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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