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Empathy and Vision: The Quiet Virtues

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1. Background

Virus was originally created to compete with the traditional (irrational) religions in the human ideosphere with the idea that it would introduce and propagate memes, which would ensure the survival and evolution of our species. The main advantage conferred upon adherents is that Virus provides a conceptual framework for leading a truly meaningful life and attaining immortality without resorting to mystical delusions.

Virus is a collection of mutually-supporting ideas (a meme-complex or memplex) encompassing philosophy, science, technology, politics, and religion. A Virian is someone who uses rational cognition to recognize, create, host, and propagate successful and beneficial memes. The core ideas are based on evolution and memetics because one of the primary design goals was survivability through adaptation (religions die, not because they grow old, but because they become obsolete). If a new religion is designed around the premise of continuously integrating better (more accurate, more useful) concepts while ensuring the survival of its believers, it could conceivably achieve true immortality.

Virus has three sins (dogmatism, apathy and hypocrisy) and three virtues (reason, vision and empathy of which the first has shown a tendency to predominate). These represent a mutually reinforcing system of checks and balances. The intent of this essay is to go some way to providing a philosophical justification for the role of these memes.

2. Virus as Memetic Complex; Hobbes, Locke, Dawkins, Dennett

In Leviathan Thomas Hobbes argued against the role of supernatural revelation as leading to truth, instead proclaiming that "knowledge acquired by reasoning... permits such effects as human life requireth." Hobbes viewed mankind as being naturally governed by his passions and incapable of forming a social bond without some element of coercion to ward off universal war. However, he also views a rudimentary capacity for reasoning as being essentially innate "it was not possible, but that there should have been generall truthes found out by Reasoning, as ancient as language itself," correspondingly citing the "Savages of America" as an example.

Nonetheless, though reason must be counted as an innate capacity (specifically because Hobbes links reason with speech; until the latter is present, the former will certainly be absent. It should be noted that this conception is decidedly dubious [1]), it is one that can only establish itself outside of a state of nature, within the context of an ordered commonwealth.

John Locke, by contrast, dismissed notions of passions governing mankind, with the notion of the tabula rasa, or blank slate. In this model, all knowledge is derived from perception and experience without recourse to innate ideas. However, Locke somewhat awkwardly excludes consideration of rationality from this, by tartly observing that "God has not been so sparing to men to make them barely two legged creatures and leave it to Aristotle to make them rational." (Essay Concerning Human Understanding).

One of the grounds for citing these two conceptions, lies with the degree to which modern conceptions of rationality are increasingly spurning the idea of the blank slate and moving towards a conception that bears a marked resemblance to that of Hobbes, if we substitute the term 'genes' for 'passions.' As Edward O Wilson

observed every human brain is born not as a blank tablet (a tabula rasa) waiting to be filled in by experience but as 'an exposed negative waiting to be slipped into developer fluid [2]. Accordingly, Michael Persinger's discovery of a neural basis for religious experience, the confirmation of genetic transformative grammar in Nicaraguan deaf children and so on have continued to undermine the blank slate. As such, the idea of human nature as a malleable concept that can be remoulded requires some amendment.

One can, of course, go further and apply this parallel to memes, since the viral metaphor for memetic activity has some relation to the idea of passions that were only partially controllable by the infected agent. According to Dennett, Hobbes was essentially correct to assume a basic capability for rationality, "they are rational in one sense of that word...but that does not mean they are rational in a narrower sense; the product of serial reasoning" (Consciousness Explained) In other words, while much of what we term 'reason' is innate, much is also memetic, a product of culture.

To place that in context, a study by Dr Richard Nisbett showed that Easterners appeared to think more "holistically," paying greater attention to context and relationship, relying more on experience-based knowledge than abstract logic and showing more tolerance for contradiction. Westerners are more "analytic" in their thinking, tending to detach objects from their context, to avoid contradictions and to rely more heavily on formal logic (the same distinction between classical and romantic knowledge more informally advanced in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance). Accordingly, much of what we mean by rationality is inherent heuristic ratiocination, much of it a complex memeset, a much more complex and diverse conception than has historically been the case, requiring the defence of reason to be conducted in a much more complex and diverse manner.

3. The Defence of Reason

"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 key 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."
(Carl Sagan)

The backdrop to this piece is a world where, at the very moment of Western technological and economic supremacy, its ideological superstructure is playing host to irrational ideologies largely appropriated in reaction to it. The examples are fairly well known; any increased secularisation in society results in the religious fundamentalist siege mentality becoming accentuated in inverse proportion.

As mainstream religions decline, new age ideologies increase, and as the benefits of science and technology become ever more ubiquitous throughout society, the result is a fearful population that shuns anything that outrages this sensibility, from MMR vaccinations to non-organic or genetically modified foods. A space station is being built and a trip to Mars planned, yet around half of the American population is unaware that the earth orbits the sun and takes a year to do so. Millions of Americans believe in UFOs, astrology and spoon-bending not so much in spite of advances in science but in apparent defiance of them.

Accordingly, looking at the above quote, much of what Sagan feared is proving to have some basis. Where Europe is fearful of genetic modification it is embraced with alacrity in India. Where the United States outlaws stem cell research and cloning, China increases its funding of those areas. As such, the rationalist critique of such prevalent social norms should be sufficiently obvious as to obviate any further discussion.

However, reason is a starting point, not an end-point; and all too often people make perfectly rational decisions which turn out to be bad because they were framed with too limited a scope. They fail to consider the real consequences (meaning) of their actions. For example, as Eric Drexler observed in Engines of Creation "even reason can be dangerous; if a tradition links sound practices to a fear of ghosts then overconfident rational thought may throw out the good with the bogus... the soundest tradition may be displaced by worse ideas that better appeal to the rational mind." The following two sections trace how this can happen.

4. Reason and Vision: Politics

As such, it is important to consider the historical errors made by concentration on reason without vision or empathy.

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has suggested that the Holocaust could only happen because of modernity's rational structuring, its technology and bureaucracy. What modernity did was to generate unintended consequences of bureaucratic complexity and created the conditions in which moral responsibility disappeared.

Accordingly, similar conceptions of eugenics were adopted and received scientific credibility in many countries including the US and Scandinavia. The idea was far from being novel, having first being voiced by Heidegger; "Agriculture is now a motorised food industry – in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers, the extermination camps, the same as the starving of nations, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs." (Quoted in Victor Farias, Heidegger and National Socialism) There may well be something to this, but genocide has been easily facilitated without concentration camps and bureaucracy and any description of the Final Solution as any form of enlightenment project does tend to stretch the boundaries of credulity rather too far.

The case of communism is arguably rather more difficult, since it was indeed an enlightenment project in many respects, an attempt to order society along rational lines that expressed a belief in the human ability to do this. For Friedrich Hayek, the totalitarian disasters that have occurred when utopians attempt to redesign society according to their rational plan shows just how little we know about the workings of the complex system of rules on which the social order is based; "The tragedy of collectivist thought is that, while it starts out to make reason supreme, it ends by destroying reason." (The Road to Serfdom)

Since knowledge is limited and reason constrained, complex societies are not subject to prediction. In particular, attempting to predict social behaviour in advance of the individual decision is invalid since the predicting agency may skew the results. This formed the backbone of Hayek's critique of communism. As a consequence of this epistemology Hayek defended the free market, as against command economics.

Equally, communism always described itself as being scientific, but was criticised by Popper for failing to pay heed to instances where its tenets had been falsified (e.g. Lysenko's dogmatic adherence to Lamarkian evolution in the face of the facts invalidating the theory, which had disastrous consequences for Russian agriculture). In particular, Popper regarded communist claims to predict social trends as being spurious. Since such events cannot be predicted, the only sensible approach is to proceed through continual scrutiny; to Popper the notions of democracy and rights can be considered as being analogous to peer review, a view that precisely tallies with the Virian rejection of dogmatism.

5. Rationality and Vision: Philosophy

At one point within "Why I am not a Christian", Russell makes a rather curious statement; "active malevolence is the worst aspect of human nature, and the one which it is most necessary to change if the world is to grow happier." The idea of a constant nature is conjoined with a more fluid conception. Elsewhere, Russell writes of "primitive impulses" of fear that perpetuate religions, and condemns religion for seeking to arrest natural impulses while only succeeding in retarding them. But these primitive impulses can apparently be wiped from the Tabula Rasa; "educational reforms must be the basis, since men who feel hate and fear will also admire these emotions and wish to perpetuate them." Education becomes critical for Russell, noting, after Skinner, that "the scientific psychologist, if allowed a free run with children, can manipulate human nature as freely as Californians manipulate the desert." On the one hand, "ecclesiastics cooperate in education, because all depend for their power upon the prevalence of emotionalism... intensifying and increasing the propensities of the average man."

The results of this tension of nature and nurture are somewhat equally uncertain. Russell suggests (presumably thinking of Skinner where we would now think of Pinker) that "Nature, even human nature, will cease more and more to be an absolute datum... it will become what scientific manipulation has made it." The result of this, he suggests is that we will acquire the same domination over our passions (note the Hobbesian term) as we have over the external world.

The difficulty begins when Russell observed that in Russia alone "the state is not in the grip of moral and religious prejudices," taking the view that the state will play a greater role in family life and in so doing decrease inherited prejudices" (and indeed Russia was to a large extent successful in displacing religion from the Russian psyche). Russell certainly notes that this could equally be used as an instrument of propaganda and coercion and was vociferous in criticising the Soviet Union at a later date, but the tensions between liberty and rationality remained unresolved.

As such, Russell described one of the defects of religion as being its individualism, contrasting Christ unfavourably with Plato and arguing that modern society requires a more social conception of welfare (a much more uncertain concept now). Contrast this to Hayek's "individualism, in contrast to socialism and all other forms of totalitarianism, is based on the respect of Christianity for the individual man and the belief that it is desirable that men should be free to develop their own individual gifts and bents." (The Road to Serfdom) The irony is that neither are correct; individualism and humanism developed in the Renaissance in opposition to the religious collectivism preferred in the middle ages.

In short, dogmatism has more than earned a place as a Virian sin, and reason alone having both flaws and limitations; vision and empathy, the Virian virtues, are required in conjunction with reason.

6. Reason and Empathy: Descartes, Spinoza, Damasio

An illustration of the importance of empathy as a supplement to reason lies with Descartes and Spinoza. Descartes established the dichotomy of emotion and reason, where, for Antonio Damasio, Spinoza had argued the converse, that far from the mind being a reasoning machine, most thought and feelings relate primarily to the body and to emotions (conversely Descartes had separated mind and body with the ghost in the machine argument). Damasio has suggested that Spinoza was correct and that the division of reason and emotion is a fallacy, observing that damage to the prefrontal cortex, can leave a patient apparently intellectually unimpaired but incapable of making complex decisions due to the lack of emotional capacity permitting the weighting of differing choices.

As an example, Damasio cites the example of Phineas Gage, who had tamping rod blown through his skull by an explosion, thereby destroying much of the front part of his brain but leaving him alive and apparently unaffected. However, his personality was profoundly altered; from being a responsible foreman he became feckless and irresponsible.

One of Damasio's own patients, 'Elliot', had a brain tumour successfully removed but his frontal lobes were damaged during the operation. Although his intelligence was unaffected, he could no longer carry on his professional work. He had to be prompted to go to work, and when he got there he might start on one task and persist with it even when it was time to change to something else, or he might spend the whole day pondering how to classify a paper he had just read. In short, he could manage isolated tasks well but couldn't integrate them into a wider frame of reference. He lost his job, became involved in unwise financial speculations, and ended up bankrupt. In spite of being confronted with the disastrous consequences of his decisions, he was unable to learn from them. Much the same applies to the role of emotion (and empathy in particular) in ethics; recent evidence shows a causal role played by the absence of emotional centres in sociopathy. Our moral centre is also to some extent an emotional centre.

In short, if emotion and reason are inseparable then empathy and vision become of paramount importance.

7. Conclusion

Treating concepts like reason and science as being memetic affords a number of advantages, not least of which is shifting towards being a more emergent and evolving set of concepts. For example, a successful scheme commonly has certain attributes: wide scope (a paradigm that explains much); opportunity for the carriers to participate and contribute; conviction of its self-evident truth (carries Authority); offers order and a sense of place, helping to stave off the dread of meaninglessness. Equally, the presence of the Virian sins and virtues within the meme complex reinforces, rather than detracts, from the presence of reason and avoids many of the misconceptions experienced by rational systems in the past. Falling back on reason without the accompanying Virian sins and virtues is not without its difficulties. As A.J. Ayer put it, in Language, Truth and Logic; "to be rational, is simply to employ a self-consistent accredited procedure in the formation of all one's beliefs... if in the future we were to adopt different methods, then beliefs which are now rational might become irrational."

Footnotes

[1] Homo Habilis (possibly australopithecines) created tools (crudely flaked "chopper cores") by 2.6 MYBP (Oldowan Gorge) H. Erectus created hand axes by 1 MYBP (the tools from St Acheul, France date to around 300 kYBP). Tool appearance rather than pure functionality seems to have dominated these designs, which I suggest indicates a level of higher-than-ape cognition. We also know that we could not speak (brain capacity limits and throat structure) before 120 kYBP and most likely not before around 70 kYBP. So if tool development indicates reasoning, then reasoning predates speech.—thanks to Hermit.

[2] See: <http://tetrica.com/science/soulhasdied.html>

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Glossary

The Virus Glossary is at: <http://virus.lucifer.com/lexicon.html>

Other terms can be found in the Virus Wiki at: <http://virus.lucifer.com/wiki>.



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