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PREDICTABLY IRRATIONAL?

Predictably Irrational is the title of a bestselling book by the behavioural economist Dan Ariely. This is one of many such books, all of which are about the ways in which we are irrational or less than perfectly rational. Yet, while behavioural economists like Ariely regard irrationality as endemic in our lives, many philosophers continue to the impressed by human rationality. It’s not that irrationality isn’t a topic in philosophy; philosophers do discuss such things as self-deception and weakness of the will, and are prepared to view these as forms of irrationality. However, what makes irrationality philosophically interesting is that fact that it is a departure from what is seen as the norm: in the terminology of the last chapter, rationality is normal (as well as the Normal) for humans, and that’s why irrationality needs explaining. In contrast, the impression you get from writers like Ariely is that irrationality is the norm, and that human beings are not just irrational but predictably irrational.

It’s possible that philosophers and behavioural economists are to some extent talking at cross purposes. What behavioural economists mean when they describe us as ‘irrational’ might turn out to be consistent what philosophers mean when they describe man as a rational animal. In addition, not all behavioural economists would accept Ariely’s formulations. Some of the key papers in the history of behavioural economics were written by Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky, and it’s telling that in Thinking, Fast and Slow Kahneman says this:

Irrational is a strong word, which connotes impulsivity, emotionality, and a stubborn resistance to reasonable argument. I often cringe when my work with Amos is credited with demonstrating that human choices are irrational, when in fact our research only showed that Humans are not well described by the rational agent model (2011: 411).

The ‘rational agent model’ is at the basis neoclassical economics; it is the model of humans as what Thaler and Sunstein call ‘Econs’, beings who think and choose unfailingly well, and fit the textbook picture of rational agents offered by economists. Kahneman’s point is that just because you believe that there is a significant disparity between homo sapiens and homo economicus that doesn’t commit you to thinking that human beings are irrational. Indeed, it’s not just that you aren’t committed to thinking this but that describing humans as ‘irrational’ is potentially misleading and unhelpful.

The question raised by all of this is: just what is it to be rational or irrational? How are these notions to be understood? Is Kahneman right that ‘irrational’ connotes impulsivity, emotionality, and a stubborn resistance to reasonable argument? Is this what Ariely means by ‘irrational’? If not, what does he mean? It’s important for my purposes to get clear about all of this since I’ve claimed that fast thinking and belief-perserverance aren’t irrational whereas attitude recalcitrance is. What does ‘irrational’ mean in this context? I have also talked at various times about:

Whether a person’s attitudes are irrational

Whether are person’s attitudes are as they ought rationally to be

Whether a person’s attitudes are open to rational criticism

How are these things related? For example, I said in chapter 2 that belief-perseverance might be open to rational criticism even if it isn’t irrational. But in what sense can your belief that P be open to rational criticism if it’s not irrational for you to believe that P? Can your attitude fail to be as it ought rationally to be without it, or you, being irrational? Notice also that only some of these epithets apply to both attitudes and people. Both you and your attitudes can be irrational and open to rational criticism but only your attitudes can fail to be as they ought rationally to be. This might lead one to wonder whether the most basic use of ‘irrational’ and ‘open to rational criticism’ is in relation to people or to their attitudes.

Before explaining my own view of these matters, I’d like to spend a bit more time on Ariely, since his books provide a good illustration of some of the pitfalls we need to take care to avoid. It’s striking how hard it is in a book called Predictably Irrational to figure out what Ariely means by ‘irrational’. He writes at one point that his book is about ‘human irrationality – about our distance from perfection’ (2009: xxix). The perfection referred to here is exemplified by homo economicus but it’s far from obvious that not thinking and choosing like homo economicus makes us irrational. Even if we agree that homo economicus is ideally or perfectly rational, it’s implausible that not being ideally or perfectly rational makes us irrational. Indeed, it’s striking that many of Ariely’s examples of human irrationality don’t even come close to exemplifying the phenomenon. For example, he devotes an entire chapter in the sequel to Predictably Irrational to what he calls ‘adaptation’, the human ability to get used to new environments, pain, and ‘almost everything else’ (2011: 168) but it’s never clear from the discussion what this has to do with our being irrational.

A slightly better example for our purposes is one that Ariely uses to illustrate what he calls ‘the truth about relativity’. He describes an advert for the Economist which offers three subscription choices:

1. Internet-only subscription for $59.
2. Print-only subscription for $125.
3. Print-and-internet subscription for $125.

In a survey of MIT Management students, 84% went for option 3, 16% for option 1 and none for option 2. But when option 2 was removed, 68% chose the internet-only option and only 32% chose the combined print-and-internet option. What is going on here? In the original list, option 2 was functioning as a ‘decoy’. Option 3 looks good compared to option 2, and lots of students chose option 3 as a result. Remove the decoy, which no one chose, and suddenly option 3 doesn’t look so good.

The lesson of this case, which I will call SUBSCRIPTION, is that ‘we are always looking at the things around us in relation to others’ (2009: 7). This is the relativity that helps to explain our responses to the Economist offer but why is it irrational to be influenced by considerations of relativity? The problem, according to Ariely, is not just that we are often influenced by factors that are themselves irrational but that we do not realize how often we are influenced by such factors:

If I were to distil one main lesson from the research described in this book, it is that we are pawns in a game whose forces we largely fail to comprehend…. Each of the chapters in this book describes a force (emotions, relativity, social norms, etc.) that influences our behaviour. And while these influences exert a lot of power over our behaviour, our natural tendency is to vastly underestimate or completely ignore this power. These influences have an effect on us not because we lack knowledge, lack practice, or are weak-minded. On the contrary, they repeatedly affect experts as well as novices in systematic and predictable ways (2009: 243).

This suggests that our fundamental problem is self-ignorance, ignorance of what Ariely calls ‘The Hidden Forces that Shape our Decisions’. Uncovering these forces is in turn ‘the real goal of behavioural economics’ (2011: 9); the hope is that we will make better decisions if we understand the forces that influence us.

We now have two quite different ways of understanding the claim that human beings are irrational. On one reading, we are irrational in being influenced by forces (hidden or not) that are in themselves irrational. On another reading, the suggestion is that we are irrational to the extent that we are ignorant of the forces that influence our decisions. However, there are problems with Ariely’s account on either reading. Mere self-ignorance is not itself irrational on any recognizable conception of irrationality: if in a case like SUBSCRIPTION you simply don’t realize that your choices are being influenced by the presence of decoys why does that make you irrational? There might be something to the charge of irrationality if the influence of such factors is something we ought to realize but there isn’t any case for saying that; we are supposed not to realize what is going on so it can’t just be our ignorance of the various forces that shape our decisions that makes us irrational. These forces would themselves have to be ‘irrational forces’ (2011: 9), and then we are back with the problem of having to explain in what sense each of the factors whose influence is described by Ariely counts as ‘irrational’.

What this discussion brings out is the paramount importance of being absolutely clear at the outset about the concept of irrationality, and the distinction between this concept and other concepts like that of self-ignorance. It’s no good going on about ‘human irrationality’ unless you have a decent account of the concept of irrationality, and this is what is Ariely and others like him plainly do not have. The account of irrationality I favour is Scanlon’s account in What We Owe to Each Other. With this in mind, my plan for the rest of this chapter is this: I’m going to start by listing five platitudes about the notions of ‘rationality’ and ‘irrationality’ which I think need to be respected by any viable account of these notions. This will lead into a discussion of Scanlon. He defends a narrow account of irrationality which pays due respect to the platitudes but is more restrictive than other accounts, such as Derek Parfit’s. I will explain why I think the narrow view is better and how it accounts for some of the phenomena I’ve been discussing. Finally, after using the narrow account to explain what is wrong with Ariely’s discussion, I will conclude with a short discussion of a paper I mentioned in the last chapter, Stephen Stich’s ‘Could Man be an Irrational Animal?’. Stich is a notable example of a philosopher who, unlike the rationalists I have been criticizing, plays up rather than plays down the scale of human irrationality. Although I’m sympathetic to the spirit of ‘Could Man be an Irrational Animal?’, I believe that some of my criticisms of Ariely also apply to Stich’s vastly superior discussion. In my terms, what Stich does is to draw attention to the Disparity, but this has little to do with man being an ‘irrational’ animal.

Here are the platitudes:

1. ‘Rational’ and ‘irrational’ are terms that apply to many different things, including people, beliefs, desires, fears and choices. They don’t apply to sensations like pain and hunger. If you’ve just eaten a big meal and are still hungry your hunger might be odd or surprising but not irrational; you can‘t be irrationally hungry. When it comes to arguments or inferences it’s not clear whether they can be said to be rational or irrational. It might be ‘rational’ to infer one proposition from another which entails it but we don’t tend to describe bad arguments as ‘irrational’, as opposed to ‘invalid’ or ‘fallacious’.
2. When we talk about beliefs and other attitudes as rational or irrational what we are thinking of as rational or irrational is the having of the attitude. The belief that the present government will be re-elected is one that you and I can both have, and it can be irrational for you to believe that the present government will be re-elected even if it isn’t irrational for me to have the very same belief. Your evidence and other beliefs might be different from mine. It isn’t ‘the belief that the government will be re-elected’, understood as something that different people can have, that is rational or irrational but rather believing that the government will be re-elected, given one’s other beliefs and the available evidence.
3. Even rational beings are sometimes irrational, in the sense that they sometimes have attitudes and make choices that are irrational. This is an elementary point but it’s significant because it suggests that the mere fact that some of your choices and attitudes are irrational isn’t sufficient to make you irrational, though there must be limits to how irrational your attitudes can be without also calling your rationality into question.
4. People and their attitudes can both be irrational but the sense in which a person is irrational is different from the sense in which one of his attitudes is irrational. Saying that a person is irrational implies some kind of systemic failure, and that is why the fact that some of your attitudes are irrational doesn’t necessarily make you irrational: some of your attitudes can be irrational without implying the kind of systemic failure that would justify the conclusion that you are irrational.
5. Saying that a person or attitude is irrational is different from saying that they are open to rational criticism. ‘Irrational’ is harsher but also narrower in application. If you are a poor logician and produce a fallacious argument for some conclusion you are open to rational criticism but not irrational. You might be open to rational criticism for not knowing things you should know given the evidence available to you but not knowing what you should know is not necessarily irrational.

One of the attractions of Scanlon’s account is that it does justice to these platitudes. The focus of Scanlon’s discussion is what he calls reasons in the ‘standard normative sense’. Reasons in this sense are what are at issue if you assert that P and I ask you what reason there is to think that P. A good reason for thinking that P is a consideration that counts in favour of thinking that P. The class of attitudes for which reasons in the standard normative sense can sensibly be asked for is the class of judgement-sensitive attitudes. These are attitudes that ‘an ideally rational person would come to have whenever that person judged there to be sufficient reasons for them and that would, in an ideally rational person, “extinguish” when that person judged them not to be supported by reasons of the appropriate kind’ (1998: 20). Belief, fear, admiration and respect are judgement-sensitive attitudes and are in this sense ‘in the space of reasons’. Hunger is not, which might explain why it’s not the kind of thing that can properly be described as ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’.

In these terms, ‘a rational creature is, first of all, a reasoning creature – one that has the capacity to recognize, assess, and be moved by reasons, and hence to have judgement-sensitive attitudes’ (1998: 23). When a rational creature judges that a certain attitude is warranted she generally comes to have this attitude, and ‘when a rational creature judges that the reasons she is aware of count decisively against a certain attitude, she generally does not have that attitude, or ceases to have it if she did so before’ (1998: 24). The sense in which the rationality of a person is a systemic matter is that involves systematic connections between aspects of the person’s thought and behaviour. And what makes it intelligible that ‘rational creatures are sometimes irrational’ (1998: 25) is the fact that these connections need not hold in every case.

Having explained what it is for a creature to be rational or irrational Scanlon says the following about what it takes for one’s attitudes to be irrational:

Irrationality in the clearest sense occurs when a person’s attitudes fail to conform to his or her own judgements: when, for example, a person continues to believe something (continues to regard it with conviction and take it as a premise in subsequent reasoning) even though she judges there to be a good reason for rejecting it, or when a person fails to form and act on an intention to do something even though he or she judges there to be an overwhelmingly good reason. These are clear cases of irrationality because the thought or action they involve is in an obvious sense “contrary to (the person’s own) reason”: there is a direct clash between the judgements a person makes and the judgements required by the attitudes he or she holds. Irrationality in this sense occurs when a person recognizes something as a reason but fails to be affected by it in one of the relevant ways (1998: 25).

On this account there is a distinction between an attitude’s being irrational and its being mistaken or open to rational criticism. Someone who is hasty or careless in arriving at the conclusion that P may be open to rational criticism but isn’t irrational. Mistaken or misguided beliefs are open to rational criticism but ‘not every mistaken belief is one that it is irrational to hold’ (1998: 25) BAT AND BALL is a very good illustration of this point: if you believe as a result of fast thinking that the ball costs 10 cents then you are wrong and open to rational criticism. However, it’s not irrational to think the ball costs 10 cents as long as there is no conflict between what you believe (that the ball costs ten cents) and what you take yourself to have good reason to believe (that the ball costs ten cents). It might be ‘contrary to reason’ to believe that the ball costs ten cents but it isn’t contrary to your own reason.

Scanlon describes his account of irrationality as ‘narrow’ and it’s easy to see why. On his account, irrationality is a kind of inconsistency. Critics object that Scanlon’s view is too narrow and that ‘irrationality’ in the ordinary sense is a much broader notion, meaning ‘open to rational criticism’. Parfit observes that in Scanlon’s sense the term ‘irrational’ applies ‘only to people who fail to respond to what they themselves believe to be reasons’ (2011: 123). On Parfit’s preferred broader construal, the term also applies to those who fail to respond to what are reasons, and not just to those who fail to respond to what they themselves acknowledge to be reasons. On this account, our beliefs are irrational ‘when we are failing to respond to clear and strongly decisive epistemic reasons not to have these beliefs’ (2011: 122). For Parfit, ‘irrational’ in the ordinary sense means ‘deserves strong criticism of the kind we also express with words like “foolish”, “stupid”, and “crazy”’ (2011: 123). This claim is directly at odds with my final so-called platitude.

One problem with the broad construal of irrationality is that it makes it tough for us to draw straightforward distinctions between different types of cognitive failing. If ‘irrational’ means ‘open to rational criticism’ then in the case of the poor logician and BAT AND BALL we would have to say that the subject’s attitude is irrational but that’s wrong. If there is a lot at stake in giving the right answer to BAT AND BALL (you’ll be shot if you make a mistake) then it would undoubtedly be foolish to judge that the ball costs 10 cents but still not strictly irrational. The narrow construal of irrationality also does better with phenomena like belief-perseverance and attitude recalcitrance. I argued in chapter 2 that whereas recalcitrance is irrational, belief-perseverance is not. The narrow account of irrationality makes sense of this verdict and also allows us to say that belief-perseverance is open to rational criticism without being irrational. The broad account ends up lumping together phenomena that clearly should not be lumped together; the sense in which belief-perseverance is open to rational criticism is different from the sense in which attitude recalcitrance is open to rational criticism, and the obvious way to mark this distinction is to say that only the latter is irrational.

It’s quite easy to see why, on the narrow account, recalcitrance counts as irrational. In chapter 1 I gave the example of fear as a recalcitrant attitude: in this example, call it SPIDER, you are afraid of the spider in your bathtub despite knowing that you have no reason to be afraid of it. Fear is your attitude and it isn’t extinguished by your judgement that there is good reason to reject it. Understood in this way, your fear is ‘irrational’ in the narrow sense. It’s also irrational in the broad sense of irrational if anything that is irrational in the narrow sense is also irrational in the broad sense; unless you have a phobia it is ‘foolish’ or ‘stupid’ to fear the spider in your bathtub when you judge that there is no reason to be afraid of it. However, we now run into the following problem: fear is supposed to be judgement-sensitive but in SPIDER your fear is judgement-insensitive. Isn’t this a problem for the narrow account, and isn’t the obvious conclusion that there are in fact two varieties of fear, judgement-sensitive and judgement-insensitive fear? However, once we think of recalcitrant fear as judgement-insensitive it looks as though it can’t be irrational. We don’t think of other judgement-insensitive states of mind such as hunger as irrational (or rational) so how can judgement-insensitive fear be irrational? Surely the right thing to think is that it isn’t in the space of reasons, and that terms like ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ don’t apply to it.

This argument misunderstands Scanlon’s judgement-sensitive/ judgement-insensitive distinction. In fact, there is no basis for distinguishing between two varieties of fear, or for claiming that recalcitrant fear isn’t judgement-sensitive. Remember that judgement-sensitive attitudes are ones that an ideally rational person (homo philosophicus?) would come to have whenever that person judged there to be sufficient reasons for them. In that case your fear is judgement-sensitive, for whenever an ideally rational person judged there to be sufficient reason to fear spiders he would fear them. Your fear is also judgement-sensitive in another sense: it belongs to the ‘class of things for which reasons in the standard normative sense can sensibly be asked for or offered’ (Scanlon 1998: 21); you can sensibly be asked why you are afraid of the spider in your bathtub. The point is that judgement-sensitive attitudes must be generally responsive to the agent’s judgements about the adequacy of the reasons for having them but the fact that in this case your attitude isn’t responsive to your reasons is consistent with its being the kind of attitude that is generally reason-responsive.

Why, on the narrow construal of irrationality, is belief-perseverance not irrational? Let’s consider KAREN again: she believes that P, the proposition that she has an aptitude for science and music but not for history and philosophy, on the basis of her reported test results. When she finds out that she was given the wrong results, she continues to believe that P. On the broad construal of irrationality, whether this belief is irrational depends on whether Karen is failing to respond to clear and decisive epistemic reasons not to believe that P after the discrediting of her evidence. You might think that the discrediting of her evidence is itself a clear and decisive epistemic reason for her not to believe that P. On the other hand, it could also be argued that the discrediting of her evidence only means that she has lost one clear and decisive epistemic reason to believe that P, and that this is not the same as having a clear and decisive epistemic reason not to believe that P; maybe Karen has, or thinks she has, other reasons for believing that P. There remains the question whether Karen is “foolish”, “stupid”, or “crazy” to continue to believe that P but it’s not entirely clear what the answer to the question is.

Unlike the broad account of irrationality, the narrow account has no trouble giving the right verdict in KAREN. As I’ve said, the right verdict is that her continuing to believe that P is not irrational because she doesn’t judge there to be a good reason for rejecting this belief. Her believing that P isn’t contrary to her own reason because she doesn’t realize her belief has been discredited by the discovery that there was a mix up over wrong test results. This is something she can fail to realize as long as she doesn’t realize the discredited evidence was the sole evidence for her belief that P. She doesn’t realize this because, like most of us, Karen is bad at keeping track of her original reasons for her beliefs. It would be irrational for Karen still to believe that P if she is aware that her sole evidence has been discredited but this would turn the example into a case of recalcitrance and not mere perseverance.

Is Karen nevertheless open to rational criticism for continuing to believe that P? Yes, on the basis that her belief is mistaken and misguided. Another consideration is whether, after the discrediting of her evidence, Karen believes what she ought rationally to believe. At least by her own lights she does because she doesn’t realize that her belief has been discredited. But the fact is that her belief has been discredited, and her failure to recognize this doesn’t get her off the hook epistemologically speaking. So perhaps what we should say about Karen is this: her continuing to believe that P after her sole evidence for P has been discredited is in fact a case of her believing what she ought no longer to believe, even though she doesn’t realize it. Her failure to realize that her evidence has been discredited means that she is open to rational criticism rather than strictly irrational for continuing to believe that P. This take on KAREN exploits Scanlon’s distinction between being irrational and being open to rational criticism. At the same time, it links Karen’s being open to rational criticism to her believing what she ought not to believe.

Another case which brings out the importance of distinguishing between a belief’s being irrational and its being open to rational criticism is OLIVER. Oliver believes that P (the collapse of the twin towers on 9/11 was caused by explosives planted in advance rather than by aircraft impact and the resulting fires) because P follows from various other things he believes on the basis of what he regards as ‘evidence’. Suppose that Q is the proposition from which Oliver infers P. Q might be the proposition that aircraft impacts couldn’t have caused the towers to collapse and that eye witnesses heard explosions just before the collapse of each tower. In these circumstances, is Oliver’s belief that P irrational? Notice that there is nothing wrong with Oliver’s reasoning from Q to P, and no clash between his judgements and the judgements required by the attitudes he holds. In this sense his attitudes are not irrational. Is his belief that P nevertheless irrational in the sense that it fails to respond to strongly decisive epistemic reasons not to have it? Even that isn’t clear. Oliver is, of course, aware of official denials of P but his response is “They would say that, wouldn’t they?”. He doesn’t just ignore the official denials of P but has a story to tell about why such denials are not to be trusted.

One advantage of the narrow over the broad construal of irrationality is that it delivers a clear, as well as a plausible, verdict in cases like OLIVER. The clear and plausible verdict is that Oliver’s belief that P is foolish, stupid, and open to rational criticism but not irrational. The next challenge is to explain why his belief is open to rational criticism despite not being irrational. In chapter 2 I quoted Sebastian Rödl as claiming:

If P follows from Q, then someone who believes Q rationally ought to believe P (2007: 88).

If this is right then in believing P Oliver believes what he ought rationally to believe. In that case, how can he be open to rational criticism? The reply to this is that he is open to rational criticism because he shouldn’t believe that Q. If he shouldn’t believe that Q then he shouldn’t believe that P, given that he infers P from Q. The delicate question is: what’s wrong with believing that Q? Again, the issue isn’t whether it’s irrational to believe that Q. Consider the claim that aircraft impacts couldn’t have caused the towers to collapse. This claim has (I take it) been refuted by a National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) study but Oliver dismisses the NIST study and attaches much greater weight to claims by conspiracy theorists that explosive residues were found in the debris of the twin towers. What has gone wrong is that Oliver attaches too much weight to such claims and not enough weight to the NIST report. Given the NIST report Oliver shouldn’t believe that Q and is open to rational criticism for believing that Q. However, attaching too much weight to one piece of evidence and too little to another isn’t strictly irrational, even though it is something for which Oliver deserves criticism.

I hope I’ve said enough to convince you of the following:

* There’s rather a lot to be said for construing irrationality narrowly rather than broadly. The narrow construal does justice to the five platitudes and delivers the correct verdict on examples like SPIDER, BAT AND BALL, KAREN and OLIVER. In some of these cases the broad construal gives the wrong verdict or no clear verdict.
* Whereas attitude recalcitrance is irrational, belief-perseverance per se is not. If you don’t realize your evidence for P has been discredited you aren’t irrational for continuing to believe that P though you might be open to rational criticism.
* In such cases being open to rational criticism is linked to your believing what you shouldn’t believe. The fact that you think your beliefs are as they ought rationally to be doesn’t mean that they are as they ought rationally to be or that they aren’t open to rational criticism.

Bearing these points in mind, along with the five platitudes, we can now go back to Ariely. As a behavioural economist he is primarily concerned with the extent to which our choices and behaviour are irrational rather than with the irrationality of our beliefs. One issue, therefore, is whether the choices and behaviour he describes are really irrational, and not just flawed in some other way. Another is whether, if they are examples of irrationality, Ariely is justified in concluding that we are predictably irrational. On the first issue, I’ve already made the point that there is no clear sense in which the choices made by the majority of subjects in SUBSCRIPTION are irrational; just because you aren’t aware that your choices are being influenced by a decoy that doesn’t make them irrational. On a narrow interpretation of irrationality they would only be irrational if they are inconsistent with your own sense of what you have reason to choose. This can happen: if you are trying to lose weight you know perfectly well that you should not have the chocolate dessert but might still choose to have it. Knowingly choosing the high fat dessert is irrational but SUBSCRIPTION is different. You might be open to rational criticism for switching from option 3 to option 1 after the removal of option 2 – though even that isn’t completely obvious - but switching under the influence of relativity doesn’t make you irrational: you aren’t at any stage choosing something you know you have a good reason not to choose.

On the narrow construal of irrationality fewer of our choices and less of our behaviour are irrational than Ariely would have us believe. It’s also important to keep it mind that even rational creatures can make irrational choices (this was my third platitude), so you can’t jump directly from the claim that humans make irrational choices to the conclusion that humans are irrational. Given my fourth platitude, the real issue is whether our irrational choices, such as they are, are evidence of a systemic failure that is serious enough call into question whether we are rational beings. If a rational being is one that has the capacity to recognize, assess, and be moved by reasons then examples like SUBSCRIPTION plainly do not show that we aren’t rational beings. Even if we agree that we aren’t being moved by ‘reason’ or ‘reasons’ in cases like SUBSCRIPTION, this doesn’t show that we lack the capacity to be moved by reasons or to recognize and assess reasons; a creature can have the capacity to be moved by reasons and yet not be moved by them at all times. The inescapable conclusion is that nothing that Ariely says has any bearing on whether human beings are rational beings in the systemic sense. The most that he and other behavioural economists show is that we aren’t homo economicus but not being homo economicus doesn’t make us ‘irrational’.

Turning, finally, to Stich, some of the things I’ve been saying about Ariely also apply to him. Stich’s question is: could man be an irrational animal? His first move in tackling this question is to observe that human beings ‘regularly and systematically invoke inferential and judgemental strategies ranging from the merely invalid to the genuinely bizarre’ (1985: 115). He notes, however, that there are philosophers like Daniel Dennett who argue that ‘empirical evidence could not possibly support the conclusion that people are systematically irrational’. Stich disagrees: ‘my central thesis is that philosophical arguments aimed at showing that irrationality cannot be experimentally demonstrated are mistaken’ (ibid.).

The inferential and judgemental strategies Stich discusses include violations of basic principles of probabilistic reasoning as well as familiar examples of belief perseverance. He reads Dennett as arguing that supposed experimental demonstrations of human irrationality are at odds with the inevitable rationality of believers: ‘people must be rational if they can usefully be viewed as having any beliefs at all’ (1985: 121). In response Stich argues that ‘it is simply not the case that our ordinary belief and desire ascriptions presuppose full rationality’ (1985: 121-2). When we ascribe propositional attitudes to others, we take it that they are ‘in relevant ways, similar to ourselves (1985: 122). We know that we make mistakes in our reasoning and so have no difficulty imagining that other believers do the same: in order to view other people as having beliefs we don’t have to regard them as fully rational.

I think that Stich is right to this extent: what he objects to is pretty much the same as what I was objecting to in my discussion of Psychological Rationalism: the idea that we must approximate to homo philosophicus if we have beliefs, desires and other such propositional attitudes. If “full rationality” means operating like homo philosophicus then it’s true, as Stich points out, that full rationality is not a necessary condition for having propositional attitudes; the fact that we regularly and systematically invoke inferential and judgemental strategies ranging from the invalid to the bizarre doesn’t prevent us from having propositional attitudes. But does this show that man could be an irrational animal? Yes, if being an irrational animal means ‘being prone to poor reasoning and having propositional attitudes some of which are irrational’. However, there is a deeper sense in which, like Ariely, Stich doesn’t show that we are irrational: just because some of our reasoning is poor, it doesn’t follow that we lack the capacity to recognize, assess, and be moved by reasons. This is just another example of my third and fourth platitudes in operation.

It’s an interesting question what it would take to show that humans lack the capacity to recognize, assess, and be moved by reasons. Whether or not such a thing is possible, one thing is clear: if you really think that humans are incapable of being moved by reasons, there wouldn’t be much point trying to persuade them of this. For doesn’t the philosophical project of arguing for something presuppose that the person you are addressing is capable of being moved by rational argument, and therefore rational? But being rational in this sense has little to do with being a model epistemic citizen, with being homo philosophicus, and this brings us back neatly to the one of main themes of this book, namely, the Disparity. I think that the best and most generous way of reading people like Ariely and Stich is as drawing attention to the scale of the Disparity. Saying on the basis of the Disparity that ‘man is an irrational animal’ is just a piece of hyperbole. I think that Kahneman is absolutely right about this, and I hope that this chapter has explained why he is right: the problem is not that ‘irrational’ is a strong word which connotes impulsivity, emotionality and a stubborn resistance to argument but that the description of humans, as distinct from some of their attitudes and choices, as ‘irrational’ implies a specific kind of systemic failure which just isn’t at issue in behavioural economics or the psychological literature which Stich make so much of.

Suppose, then, that we cut out talking about humans as ‘irrational’ and talk instead about the Disparity between homo sapiens and homo philosophicus. Where does this leave us? It leaves us with the task of figuring out the consequences of the Disparity. Man may be a ‘rational creature’ in Scanlon’s sense but still is a long way being homo philosophicus. I’ve suggested in previous chapters that this looks like a problem for Psychological Rationalism and for rationalism about self-knowledge. I’ve already devoted a chapter to Psychological Rationalism so it’s now time take a closer look at rationalism about self-knowledge. What we need to figure out is: how can TM be a pathway to self-knowledge given the Disparity? This was the question which got my discussion going and it’s now time to tackle it head-on.