Delusion and the Uses of Not Being Rational

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Being rational is an often-admired quality. After all, a rational mind allows us to calmly and carefully evaluate situations based on the facts rather than letting emotions cloud our thinking. There are times, however, when irrational thought has its advantages. Shedding some light on the human propensity for delusion thinking is psychologist, writer, and APS Fellow and Charter Member Stuart Vyse, author of the new book *The Uses of Delusion: Why It's Not Always Rational to Be Rational*.

Transcript:

Charles Blue (00:35)

Being rational is an often admired quality. After all, a rational mind allows us to calmly and carefully evaluate a situation based on the facts. By keeping our emotions and passions at Bay, we are able to make better decisions and more appropriate choices. Or so it may seem. If being rational all the time were such a benefit to survival, humans might have evolved to be more like the logical Mr. Spock rather than the cavalier Captain Kirk. To add a Star Trek analogy, this is Charles Blue with the Association for Psychological Science. Shedding some light on the human propensity for the delusional and the irrational. I have with me, psychologist and writer and APS fellow and Charter member Stuart Vyse has published a new book, *The Uses of Delusion: Why it's Not Always Rational to Be Rational*. Welcome back to Under the Cortex.

Stuart Vyse (01:31)

Thanks for having me, Charles. It's great to be here.

Charles Blue (01:34)

Last year, you talk with us about why some people will never get vaccinated showing the harm and irrational thinking. Your new book, however, takes a very different perspective on irrational thinking. Can you tell us about it?

Stuart Vyse (01:48)

Sure. As you point out, I most often am a fan of rationality. I write for Skeptical Enquirer magazine, which is defined as being a magazine of science and reason, and I started out my career working on superstition with the idea that if I could show people the psychological causes of superstition, then they might reject superstition and take a truer path. But as I continued my work and went into different areas, I kept bumping up against circumstances where I had to recognize that people do things that aren't consistent with reason that are not entirely rational, and yet in some circumstances they are benefited by those things. And so this book is sort of an act of humility. We need a little bit more humility these days, and it is a way of sort of correcting the impression and filling out the picture that we are a mixture of

reason and unreason. And although most of the time we should reject irrationality and superstition, there are some circumstances in which they benefit us. And I try to list those in this book.

Charles Blue (03:07)

Was there one particular discovery, one observation that really sparked this idea in your mind, or was this sort of a combination of looking back over the years and saying, well, maybe there's a bit of a story here I haven't really explored?

Stuart Vyse (03:22)

Well, I think that my first real revelation was in the realm of superstition, the idea that superstitions are, at least in the moment that people employ them. They are comforting for those people who use them. Whether they have any other benefit is another question. But psychologically, they are comforting. Now, superstition isn't for everyone. So this is not a universal thing. But for those people who engage in superstition, they obviously help them get through that difficult moment at that time. But as I went on, there were other examples that struck me. I have a particular interest in the topic of free will versus determinism, and I have a viewpoint on that that I express in the book. It's a controversial view that we are deterministic, but my view is and it's not one that is unique to me. But my view is that the illusion that we actually cause the things that we do has benefits for us socially. And there are important reasons why that illusion or delusion is there and that we have benefited from that in the long run. And so there have been a couple of things that struck me, and then I realized, well, maybe I could explore it further.

Charles Blue (04:37)

So these deterministic things, are you referring to traditions, like knocking wood before something challenging happens or putting on your favorite or your lucky blazer before going out and playing a round of golf or something along those lines where it doesn't necessarily help but it doesn't hurt, but because you think it might help, it actually provides some benefit?

Stuart Vyse (04:58)

Absolutely. We are a species that has succeeded in large part by our ability to find cause and effect relationships and to adapt to our environment. Once we realize that something we do causes us pain, we tend not to do it anymore. Finding those relationships between our own actions and things that happen in the world is very beneficial. But we do tend to sort of overuse that skill and we find connections that aren't there. And if, as you suggest, the cost of your superstition is minimal and there's some slim chance, at least in your mind, that it might bring about a better outcome, then you're going to feel better doing it than not doing it. And so, I mean, I think there's a lot that goes into becoming a superstitious person. As I say, it's not available to everyone. But for people who grew up in families where superstition was a thing, then they're going to be looking for those relationships and responding to them. Not entirely rational, obviously, but beneficial for some people in those circumstances.

Charles Blue (06:09)

How much of your book goes into the whole human brain and the fact that it's a product of evolution and natural selection? Is there anything in our evolutionary history that affects illogical thinking?

Stuart Vyse (06:22)

Absolutely. I talk a fair amount in the book about circumstances in which overconfidence is beneficial, and there are quite a few. And one of the ways in which being confident is best in terms of having success is if you believe you're confident, if you're not talking yourself into it. So the book it sort of supports a view of Robert Trivers, the evolutionary biologist who suggests that we evolved the ability for self-delusion. We think about diluting ourselves in situations where we've been attacked sort of defensively, like we delude ourselves that something bad is not really that bad or something we've done is not that bad. He suggests that self-delusion is actually an offensive weapon in the sense that if you can delude yourself into believing that you are stronger than you are or more competitive than you are, then you will, in fact, fool the competition as well. The competition is going to find any weakness in your mask, and if it's there recognize that you're fooling yourself. But if you really believe your own hype and believe that you are stronger than you really are, that will only benefit you on the playing field.

Stuart Vyse (07:39)

And so I talk about that both in terms of business situations. It can actually help in terms of dating situations and clearly in sports and other things of that nature.

Charles Blue (07:52)

But it certainly wouldn't help if you really overestimate, say, like a person on a plane and antagonizes a pro boxer like Mike Tyson. It doesn't matter how much you feel you are stronger. Sometimes reality does come back and bite you, of course.

Stuart Vyse (08:07)

Absolutely. The topic of overconfidence is a tricky one because it's not the same in every context as you suggest. Daniel Conneman was once asked what human failing would he most want to get rid of? And he said overconfidence. It was a business show he was on. And I think he was thinking about the crash of 2008, where people were overconfident about their investments and about their ability to pay mortgages. And there was this big crash. So overconfidence at the beginning of an enterprise, when there's a potential serious downside is not a good thing. Cold realism is what is needed as you launch an enterprise, or, for example, the worst case scenario if you launch a war. Wars tend to look really easy at the beginning, and then 20 years later you're still fighting them. At least that's what my observation of a number of our more recent wars has been.

Charles Blue (09:05)

Particularly what's happening now with Ukraine as well. I think Russia really overestimated the ease with which they could militarily dominate the country, and that has certainly not been borne out by the facts.

Stuart Vyse (09:19)

Absolutely. That's a good example, and there are others. But once you're in an enterprise, once you're underway, let's say you started a business, right? Starting a business is a very risky enterprise. But once

you're going with your business, overconfidence has motivational value that is really important. And furthermore, it's contagious your coworkers also feel good and work hard because they see you as a leader doing so. It depends on the context, but there clearly are beneficial motivational aspects to overconfidence.

Charles Blue (09:57)

So we've talked a lot about this idea of confidence, of giving yourself emotional mental boost by doing rituals what other types of delusion and illogical irrational thinking can be beneficial? How can this really play into make our lives better if we occasionally abandon reason and embrace something that's not quite so reasonable?

Stuart Vyse (10:22)

Well, I first want to just clarify one thing, and I don't see this as a choice. I'm not suggesting that you stand at the precipice and you say, well, I could either go with my gut and be intuitive here or I could be coldly rational. I think that the situations I'm talking about are ones in which it's either built into your psychology or it's not, and it's not felt so much as a choice. For example, the person who's going to be overconfident. I think that, again, is determined by experiences and heredity rather than being something that you can switch on and off in the moment. And there are other examples I talk in the book about we all sort of have this belief that a person has sort of an essence that is a lasting, predictable aspect of their nature, that if we know them as a good person at the beginning, that we can count on that being more or less true throughout their lives. We kind of need that if we're going to enter into marriages or friendships or business relationships. And what I suggest in the book is that that's more of a feature of chance than it is a reality that under the right circumstances, all of us are capable of horrible things if our environments demand it.

Stuart Vyse (11:43)

And that to some extent the idea that your friend, your wife, your husband is going to be exactly as they are today or at least recognizable as they are today, that's a risk that we take. It's a belief much more than a reality. At least that's what social psychology would tell us.

Charles Blue (12:05)

During the course of writing this book, did you come across any examples or points that actually surprised you? You didn't expect to see a benefit of sort of non rational thinking creating a benefit further down the road?

Stuart Vyse (12:21)

I would say that there were some that were sort of touching that I found. There's a section in the book about bereavement and about people who believe they have ongoing relationships with their loved one who has passed. And these are sort of expressions of love across the border of life and death. And it doesn't entirely make sense that you would believe that you have an ongoing relationship with someone who's dead. And yet this is also a case where for those people who experience that, they generally experience it as a positive thing. People deal with death in very different ways, and often the way they

deal with it is a reflection of that relationship when the person was alive. And if the relationship was a very close one and a very fulfilling one, then some people actually allow that relationship or somehow maintain that relationship after death and clearly benefit from it even though it doesn't entirely make sense.

Charles Blue (13:24)

There certainly are times when I'm digging around in the wiring or trying to do a bit of plumbing where I will say, all out, all right, dad, how would you handle this? Realizing that I'm not anticipating an answer, but in a sense, it allows me to think about my father's resolve and fixing mechanical issues and how he would always take a different approach to things and putting myself in his shoes. And by vocalizing that, I guess, kind of pretending, imagining that I was getting this advice, it made the task just a little easier.

Stuart Vyse (13:55)

That is not an uncommon thing. And I would suggest that what you're doing sounds a little bit like a problem solving strategy in which you put yourself in his mind a little bit as you imagine it, because he was as mechanical as he was. Who are we to say that there's something wrong with that? To me, that it isn't supported by science, but it clearly is a benefit to them. And as I say, it's kind of an interesting expression of an ongoing relationship, that death ends a life, but it doesn't necessarily always end a relationship.

Charles Blue (14:32)

We've taken a look at several of the facets of irrational thought. Are there other elements in your book that would fall under irrational thought that we haven't had a chance to go over yet?

Stuart Vyse (14:44)

Well, I would come back to the big one, which is the last chapter, which is on free will. And what I would suggest is that there's good scientific evidence that we are fooled into believing that we cause the things that we do. But obviously we are also a social species. And so having that feeling that I did this or making that attribution about someone else does allow us to have certain social control over people. This is why we have this idea of free will. In fact, there's a good evidence that it's driven more by our desire to punish or reward people than it is driven by anything scientific or real. And so I do make a longish analysis of whether free will make sense or not, and also the evidence that suggests that our feeling of free will, which, by the way, is most of the evidence that we have, we feel like we make things happen, that I'm moving my hand left and right. But that feeling is not always reliable. And there's lots of laboratory experiments where scientists have been able to deliberately fool us into believing either we caused something when we didn't or we didn't cause something when in fact, we did. And so all of that points to a very useful delusion.

Charles Blue (16:10)

Is there anything that people listening should take away from this that would be applicable in their lives, or something they should go think about later that they maybe hadn't considered?

Stuart Vyse (16:21)

Well, as I say in part, the book is an act of humility. I am in a group of people who sometimes and it's not a good thing, but they scoff at people who are superstitious or who have beliefs that are ones that they would never hold. And part of this effort is to sort of fix that balance and to recognize that we should all be sort of understanding of each other's behavior and recognize that there may be benefits that those people accrue that we don't. And so it's not our job to belittle them for that. And then the second goal of the book is simply to create a rounded picture of us and recognize that part of what has gotten us to where we are to survive and to be as dominant a species as we are today is not our big brain and our computing power. It is instead these sort of gut feelings, these emotional reactions and things that don't entirely make sense. And how you get to be that kind of person is not always up to us. It's an accident of faith, some things free will. Everyone has that issue that's not as individual, but some of these things are not going to apply to everyone.

Stuart Vyse (17:40)

But for those who do exhibit these irrationalities, they clearly get something from them. And I suspect that we would not have gotten as far as we have without these little quirks. That's what the book is about. I enjoyed writing the book immensely. It was much more fun than my previous books and I hope readers will like it too.

Charles Blue (18:04)

Well, I will have it on my reading list next month. I believe this comes out right at the beginning of May.

Stuart Vyse (18:09)

Yes, yes, May 2.

Charles Blue (18:11)

That was definitely on my nightstand by the end of the week. I can guarantee it. Stewart's book is The Uses of Delusion and it should be available now. As you're listening to this. Thank you for joining us on this episode of under the Cortex to talk about it.

Charles Blue (18:27)

My pleasure. Thanks for having me, Charles.

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