The Life of Reason

ONE OF Kipling’s characters says bitterly of another: “He thinks nobody thinks but himself.” But isn’t that true of most of us? We freely admit that some people have more expert knowledge of, say, the inside of the atom, or the inside of a motorcar. But when it comes to over-all judgment and plain common sense—what’s the matter with everybody anyway?

Presumably we need this defense of the ego, lest we look into the abyss of all we do not know, and give up the struggle altogether. Presumably some readers of this book, however, take an interest in strengthening their reasoning apparatus—even though it is better than most people’s! They see—as your author has seen in his own thinking—that there is room for improvement. Not much, perhaps, but a little.

REVIEW OF THE TOOL-MAKERS

In this brief account of everyday logic I have been chiefly concerned with certain common barriers to thinking. The pursuit of understanding, we have noted, is not a clear and open road. At least thirteen fallacies block the path. Some, like two-valued reasoning, are due in part to the structure of the language we use; in effect they have been built in. Others are due to local custom, such as the American awe of statistics, or to haste or laziness—for instance, substituting a “self-evident truth” for independent thought.

In the course of identifying the fallacies I have told many
stories, some of them perhaps amusing, but not intended merely to entertain. There are sharp tools here for tackling the verbal underbrush, weapons to defend oneself against the special pleaders, who, with all the mass media at their command, keep us under continual attack … buy my soap, buy my candidate, buy my ideology!

The first tool-makers were the Greeks, and the master armorer was Aristotle. With the laws of thought and the syllogism, he made a magnificent beginning. His followers converted the knowledge into a “self-sealing” doctrine, and there substantially it stayed for two millennia. It took Galileo and Bacon, fortified with instruments and experiments, to break out of the logic of the classicists, and inaugurate the new logics and mental tools of modern science.

Only a superman can hope to master all the new tools. The wayfaring thinker can be aware, however, that they are on the bench, ready to hand. Some he can use without difficulty to deepen his understanding. He can apply semantics, developed principally by laymen for the layman, and not so hard to grasp as cybernetics, say, or the latest refinements in symbolic logic. No semanticist can ever be made the innocent victim of verbal brain washing. I will not go so far as to say that his brain is unwashable, only that its structure is tough.

PLAYING THE GAME

There is no reason why entertainment cannot be combined with understanding. The Liebers play a game they call “logical boners,” in which they take samples from the news, the radio, the books they are reading, and analyze the errors. A fertile field of boners, as noted earlier, is the correspondence columns. Here citizens often work off their aggressive feelings about current events—“This is an outrage,” they say, “be-
cause…” In the analysis of that because, the student of logical fallacies can pursue his subject with both amusement and profit. J.B. Priestley, after reading the papers in Texas, was somewhat more than amused when he said:¹

Alongside these satirical columns in the Texas newspapers were letters from readers that were terrifying in their complacent ignorance…. Their writers argued as if they were living on the back of the moon. To them China was not a huge ruin of an Empire where armies had been wandering for years, but some little thing Alger Hiss or somebody had slipped to the Reds as a present. War was to be avoided by threatening with total destruction everybody who did not agree with the folks in Eagle Pass….  

**Reason and Emotion**

Let us go back to the question with which this book opened: Do we use our reason only to support our prejudices? After years of experience as an industrial psychologist, the late Dr. Stanley G. Law found himself in at least partial agreement with Bernard Shaw.² We are much more inclined to do what we feel like doing, he says, and then bring reason into play to justify the action. In the course of his duties as an industrial consultant, Dr. Law would interview an employee in this fashion:

“How did you feel about the foreman ordering you to shovel the two tons of sand?”

“I thought since he was boss I should do it,” the man would reply.

“Yes, but how did you feel about it?”

“Well, I thought I ought to do it.”

“That’s what you thought, but how did you feel?”

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¹ *Journey Down a Rainbow* (Harper, 1956).

“I felt like ramming the shovel down his blankety blank throat!”

Dr. Law observed clinically that such an outburst “can have an excellent therapeutic effect.” He went on to note that we accept an idea—when we do accept it—in one of two ways, intellectually or emotionally. If we are really to act on it, it must get into the nervous system, the emotions. Intellectual acceptance elicits a nod and the work “yes,” but little compulsion to do anything about it. Intellectual assent can be immediate, while emotional acceptance usually requires time, and considerable repetition of the idea.

Anyone who undertakes to write about logic and reason needs to allow for this penetrating analysis. The hope of devoting ourselves to the unremitting life of reason is dim. But note the word “unremitting.” The hope of sharpening the reasoning faculty, and even combining it with emotion from time to time, is somewhat brighter. One can become excited in tracking down an idea, as well as in tracking down one’s next meal. For instance, I trust that I am exercising my mind in this study of logical fallacies, but I am also involved emotionally. Anybody who seriously writes a book becomes emotionally involved. Harsh and unjust words by a reviewer can be like the lash of whips.

Reason and emotion, as abstract terms, may seem separate and opposite, but in common experience they are closely related. A not unfair analogy might be the relation of the steering mechanism of a car to its engine. Without energy derived from feeling, the motor, we lack the power to solve problems—personal or general. Without the ability to think objectively and see clearly, the steering wheel, we are more likely to end in a ditch than to reach our destination. Freud and his successors showed plainly the source of mental energy in egotistical and inner drives, as well as the dangers of rationalizing our desires through wishful thinking.
Despite strong emotional drives, we remain the most logical of earth’s creatures, and have survived more by our wits than our brawn. It is quite possible that the use of one’s wits for survival can be extended. It would seem, indeed, that it must be extended, to cope with the thermonuclear problems which lie ahead.

Sir George Thomson, physicist and Nobel prize winner, is optimistic about this. There are indications, he says, that we are very far from using our full mental potentialities. Consider infant prodigies and lightning calculators. “It is not obvious why everyone should not be able to do these things, and it looks as though there might be other similar faculties that could be made general if one knew how.” Maybe only geniuses, he says, think freely and naturally. “The future will see … men’s brains released from a tangle of hindrances that come from wrongly sorted impressions or barriers that have been set up.”

Hindrances, wrong impressions, barriers—what better names could we find for fallacies in reasoning? The time may be nearer than we imagine when we shall break through the mental barriers, as a jet breaks through the barrier of sound.

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