Neo-Rationalism
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1. *Introduction*

There is an important strand of thought that holds little regard for our rational capacities. In fact I would say that this strand is dominant in the contemporary English speaking world. Many lines of inquiry have converged upon a pessimistic anthropology; one that sees us as ignorant, prejudiced, biased, and prone to fallacies and irrationalisms. I will not speculate on any but the most recent of the antecedents for this consensus — plausibly it is an extrapolation of the post-modern condition, or maybe the death of God. But by whatever historic chain, an intelligent observer of today's zeitgeist would come away with a morose self-conception

I wish to both consider the elements of this pessimistic contemporary zeitgeist and also an interesting counter-reaction that has developed among analytic philosophers. I claim one can see in today's analytic philosophy a project of constructing a rival philosophical anthropology. Like the rationalists of old these philosophers would have it that, properly used, our rational faculties are capable of gaining for us important knowledge. Their task is to explain how and why that is, and also to motivate the project by defending this optimistic epistemology as a good and important.

So against a backdrop of scepticism analytic philosophers often endorse:

1. Our every day activities frequently generate knowledge of our surroundings, including of metaphysically deep aspects thereof. The foibles and odd behaviours psychologists used to demonstrate our irrationality in these circumstances were based on bad analyses of rationality.
2. Scientific inquiry is progressively generating knowledge, and we can identify future proof science that has supplied us knowledge of interesting facts already.
3. Ideological distortions and unfortunate social position do not bar us from knowledge, in fact social progress requires (and fortunately can rely on) our ability to know important social facts.

To best understand these views it will help to consider the zeitgeist they respond to. The authors I shall group together (both in characterising the zeitgeist and the philosophical reaction to it) would not likely consider themselves allies. So my claim is not that these are consciously allied camps doing battle for their respective causes. None the less, the sceptical zeitgeist is one an intelligent observer could easily pick up from reading popular or academic discussions of human rationality. I speculate that awareness of this zeitgeist is a common cause of the philosophical counter-reaction, so to that extent the actors involved are coordinated with one another.

2. *The Demon Haunted Episteme*

Philosophical tradition would have it that man is a rational animal. Not, of course, that we are always and everywhere rational in our decisions and thought patterns. But rather our superior capacity for such, and general ability to exercise this, is what distinguishes us from other critters. This tradition has, however, in recent years seemed likely to go the way of the featherless biped; as results in psychology, philosophy, and political science all stacked up against it.

Probably the most foundational move in forming the anti-rationalist zeitgeist was the emergence of the heuristics and biases literature in cognitive psychology. Famously, for instance, it was found that people tend to display "confirmation bias", a tendency towards only really seeking out and taking seriously evidence that supports what they already believe (Nickerson 1998). The general point was summarised in the wildly popular and influential Kahneman (2011) book "*Thinking Fast and Slow*". Very often people rely on 'fast and frugal' heuristics. These are quick rules of thumb for reasoning which are fine enough for the most part, but subject to systematic errors or deviations from what a properly rational agent would do. These systematic deviations are found in quite basic aspects of our reasoning and come with apparently serious consequences — for instance, it was famously found that trainee doctors, presented with a diagnostic scenario, were very prone to commit the base rate fallacy (Bar-Hillel 1983). The reliability of our normal every day reasoning, even when carried out by trained professionals in high stakes scenarios, thus seemed to be systematically undermined.

These general worries about our reasoning capacities were more recently bolstered by some pointed concerns coming from social psychology in particular. On the one hand Claude Steele (2011) popularised the idea of "stereotype threat", a kind of performance anxiety that arises when one is aware that one's behaviour may (fail to) reflect a stereotype about a salient group one is a part of. An implication quickly drawn was that various of the tests and procedures we have for allocating rewards and position in supposed meritocracies may be badly misfiring, undermining our confidence in our own institutional structures. In fact the worries went deeper, since it was argued that stereotype threat had the capacity to undermine self-knowledge (Goguen 2016). This is an important epistemic good in itself (Jones 2012), and, in so far as those who self-doubt will share less, when one undermines self-knowledge one also undermines the transfer of knowledge via testimony.

On the other hand, a huge literature arose on the idea of implicit bias. These are understood as unconscious prejudices that cause us to judge or act in line with stereotypical beliefs that we would consciously and reflectively disavow. Our unconscious thus in some sense works against us, rendering us contradictory and often bigoted. The role of implicit biases was thought to be pervasive and to do explanatory work in important social discussions such as regarding police violence (Spencer et al 2016) or teachers' evaluations of pupils (Staats 2016). It was argued that recognition of this pervasive form of bias or self-contradiction could motivate a new kind of scepticism (Saul 2013) and would compound with stereotype threat to generate even greater difficulties for self- and other- knowledge (Saul 2017). Social psychology thus combined with cognitive psychology to present an imagine of us as hopelessly prone to using reasoning heuristics that lead us awry, often in morally pernicious directions.

And moral and political psychology would only make things worse! Haidt (2001) famously argued that our moral reasoning was akin to a rational rider barely clinging on to an emotional stampeding elephant, wherein as the emotional beast does what it wills the rational rider comes up with a story to convince themselves that this is what they wanted to do anyway. Really we are quite arational moral reasoners, driven by opaque disgust or appropriation judgements that we would no wise always rationally endorse if they could be brought to light. This would seem to suggest that our apparently principled moral stances are often simply the result of self-delusion. This perspective found apparent confirmation from a number of other lines of thought. It is clear, for instance, how confirmation bias may contribute to or generate political polarisation, thus meaning that our organisation into recognisable political units reflects simple irrationality. And other moral or political habits soon came under scrutiny too. Tosi and Warmke theorised a notion of "moral grandstanding" wherein peoples apparent concern for moral principle was often a cynical ploy for esteem or power within some group (Tosi & and Warmke 2020). That such occurs and with baleful effect would subsequently receive some experimental confirmation (Grubbs *et al* 2020). Our moral and political psychology, just as much as our cognitive and social psychology, is apparently shot through with bias and deception.

Given this it is perhaps unsurprising to learn that theorists of ideology have also enjoyed a recent resurgence. Despite it being a somewhat neglected topic outside of Marxist circles for some time, contemporary theorists have come to appreciate that "[I]deologies are menacing forces that are capable of having an enormous impact on social relations and the prospects for progressive social change" (Shelby 2003, 155). To this end political theorists (e.g. Roemer 2012) and economists (e.g. Picketty 2020) have argued that widespread false beliefs, actively encouraged by powerful actors enriched and empowered by our system (see e.g. Orestes & Conway 2011), are necessary to maintain the incredibly inegalitarian political-economic structure we live within. This makes it inevitable that some people are allotted inferior social roles, and this in itself leads to them being systematically ignored — or, anticipating such treatment, simply not bothering to share their information in the first place (Dotson 2011). The social ignorance and false beliefs that flourish as a result can have disastrous effects on our ability to deal with vitally important issues (e.g. Tilton 2022). And the aforementioned biases can come together in service of maintaining delusively positive self-images for those at the top of such unjust social structures while shielding them from knowledge of how bad it can get for those beneath them (Mills 2007). Our society systematically generates and distributes the ignorance it needs to perpetuate itself.

What is more, ameliorating or correcting this ignorance is likely to be incredibly difficult under present social conditions. For one thing the means by which propagandistic claims are perpetuated are often subtle and such as to ensure they resist direct examination of the plausibility of the claims as they are transferred (Stanley 2015). For another, there are concerns that the work done by people one might hope would correct such delusions is, due to their own entanglement in the very systems they critique, deeply subpar (Mills 2005, Berenstain 2020). This has led to a fraught atmosphere among those in the intellectual wing of the project of combatting pernicious ideology - with accusations made of exploitation (Berenstain 2016) and a chilling atmosphere of frequent harassment (Anderson 2022). More fundamentally, some worry that a core feature of pernicious societies has been that they render it rational to harbour prejudicial beliefs (Gendler 2011, Begby 2021). Worse and more radically still, it has been argued that bad societies can render reality itself deceptive, by in some sense instantiating the falsehoods they wish to organise reality around (Haslanger 2007, Jenkins 2020). Combined with an emerging conviction that even if never acted upon the beliefs engendered by oppressive ideologies are harmful in themselves — e.g. Basu 2019, Beeghly 2021 — the feeling is growing that perhaps we ought simply suspend judgement when presented with evidence on these matters (Ross 2022) or try to organise our social lives to avoid having to make use of pernicious knowledge (Dembroff 2018, Webster 2021). We are so ensnared by our biases and bad ideologies that we cannot even trust our dedicated intellectual workers to think their way out of it and offer us better alternatives.

Techno-science has likewise not escaped crisis. Theoretical work raising the alarm by Ioannidis (2005) was backed up by the Open Science Collaboration's (2015) study demonstrating very poor replication rates among influential psychological studies. Upon examination prompted by this "replication crisis" causes running deep in the social structure of science were found (Heesen 2018). Key features of science's self image have subsequently been shown to be undermined by its own social structure. Self-corrective mechanisms (Romero 2016, Vazire & Holcombe 2022), peer review (Lee 2015, Heesen & Bright 2021), or claims to demographic unbiasedness (Rubin & O'Connor 2018, Heesen & Romeijn 2019, Hengel 2022) have all been discredited. And while even well meaning scientists can be mal-incentivised to do good work (Bright 2016, Zollman 2021) as it turns out baleful industry influence on science is pervasive (Pinto 2015, Holman & Bruner 2017, Bright & Heesen forthcoming). All this together led to the pessimistic induction (Lauren 1981, Stanford 2006) being revived. Perhaps science is simply not up to the task, and is so organised as to reliably generate theories that we shall later discover are falsified by the evidence we have available to us (Stanford 2019). And these concerns were not confined to the intelligentsia. The replication crisis caught the public attention because many unreplicable studies had been taken as secure and used as the basis of policies by governments and industry (Singal 2021). An intelligent observer of the public scene could not help but note that it is not just us as individual reasoning agents whose rational credentials are at fault, but even organised science is not safe.

Finally, all this comes to a head where science meets society most directly — in technology and technique. The mass adoption of machine-learning technologies for classification and recommendation generated another epistemic crisis which has recently roiled our self-conception. For it turns out that the technologies we adopted to organise our labour, governance, and consumption, are impenetrable to us in their workings, and prejudicial in their outputs. Attempting to ascertain how they can be made interpretable to us is an on going intellectual project (e.g. Creel 2020). But in the meantime it has been found they can be used to make the workplace opaque to those who work therein, deepening workers' unfreedom and alienation (Vredenburgh 2022). When adopted by government organisations they reproduced at mass scale the exact prejudices and biases that concerned us in the human case (Angwin 2016, Johnson 2021). And when applied to advertising and political messaging on widespread social media platforms our technologies spread lies and misinformation (O'Connor & Weatherall 2019). While this is sometimes done by organised and powerful state-corporate agents (e.g. Wylie 2019), even apparently innocuous behaviours by individual users could, at scale, generate polarisation and mass error (Rini 2017). Once again, all of this is well known to much of the public.

In short we are ignorant little wretches, prone to error and delusion. We are mere pawns of powerful political agents and indifferent technologies that are far beyond our control (Rosa 2020). Our science is corrupt, and at most our intelligentsia advocate a managed surrender. The Cartesian demon could scarce do worse than what we have by our own hands wrought.

3. *The Optimistic Rejoinder*

Before our observer of the zeitgeist becomes entirely forlorn, however, they should at least hear out the alternative perspective being developed by analytic philosophers. This perspective is perhaps best grounded in the knowledge-first programme, outlined initially by (Williamson 2002). The details of the position and its philosophical and psychological support are not relevant to us here (on which see McGlynn 2014). More important is what it entailed about knowledge — namely, knowledge is ubiquitous. When we make assertions (Turri 2016), when we display skilful behaviour (Stanley 2011, Stanley & Krakauer 2013, Stanley & Willimson 2017), when we take any sort of justified action (Hawthorne & Stanley 2008) or form a stable intention (Habgood-Coote 2018), we are always and everywhere presupposing some knowledge of the world. There are even those who go further, for instance arguing that we have not just knowledge but rational certainty in some matters (e.g. Climenhaga 2021) or that when we know we also know that we know, and so on ad infinitum (e.g. Das & Salow 2018). One need not go quite so far as them to have picked up the general gist of this strain of thought: we as matter of course are able to come to know all sorts of interesting things, and regularly make use of that knowledge in advancing our projects. This is not strictly incompatible with the impression one would have got from the above survey of the zeitgeist, but it is certainly against the spirit of the thing. How can it be that analytic philosophers have developed such epistemic confidence in this day and age?

Well, for one thing thing the studies purporting to show that each of us individually is a hotbed of bias and illogic have not held up so well to inspection. Cognitive scientists have not been able to agree on how to reliably test for the presence and degree of implicit biases or what is even at stake in such debates (Byrd & Thompson 2022). Some philosophers and cognitive scientists think the whole notion is simply unsalvageable (Machery 2022) and others have been quick to point out that this would undermine many sceptical conclusions people have been inclined to draw (Buckwalter 2019). What is more, philosophers have started either pairing up with cognitive psychologists or doing the work themselves to test out their more rationalistic hypotheses about human inquiry — and have met with some success. For instance research has been done on how people decide at what level of abstraction they will reason about causal claims (Kinney & Lombrozo 2022). The results of that research suggested that people are well modelled by a normative account of such reasoning that has us as rational decision makers sensibly handling choices given the value of the information we seek to gain (Kinney 2018). Likewise, far from irrational prejudice or mere confirmation bias, experimental and theoretical work has been done which suggests that political polarisation could flow from rational responses to ambiguous evidence (Dorst forthcoming). We shall see how these turn out, the point is just this — analytic philosophers are very well represented among those who are pushing back on the empirical case for scepticism about our rational capacities. This no doubt both reflects and feeds back into the confidence in our rational capacities on display among the knowledge-first philosophers.

Likewise there is an atmosphere of optimism about the deliverances of scientific reasoning. From the get-go the knowledge-first programme has had an interest in matters scientific, as Williamson famously argued that our evidence just is our knowledge (Williamson 1997). Nowadays this has been expanded into optimistic treatments of scientific progress as the gradual accumulation of knowledge (Bird 2007, 2022 ch.3) — or even something stronger (Dellsén 2016) — wherein we are capable of identifying some interesting facts we know now that will stand the test of time, contrary to the pessimistic induction (Vickers 2022). In a similar spirit, arguments have been made downplaying the so-called replication crisis (Bird 2021). With renewed faith in the success of science we can draw upon its methods or results and thereby even plausibly claim to have metaphysical knowledge (Paul 2012, Williamson 2016). So far from being trapped in a sceptical nightmare are we that we are actually making firm strides towards knowledge of the deep structure of the universe!

And a good thing too, for these philosophers have also been keen to stress that knowledge is not in fact within our grasp but that realising as much is important for social progress. At base here is the old leftist instinct that defeatism is reactionary (Finlayson 2017) and that acquiring knowledge and deploying it strategically just is the duty of anyone who would change the world (Bright forthcoming §4). But what is especially interesting is that these instincts have been elaborated in a way that is reflective of the intellectual habits and thought patterns of analytic philosophers.

So, for instance, it has been argued that the pessimist's focus on "fake news" coming from social media elides important distinctions and actually inhibits our ability to understand epistemic failings (Habgood-Coote 2019). That apparently sophisticated scepticism leads straightforwardly to morally abhorrent inaction in the face of obvious evil (Williamson 2019). That conjuring up sceptical worries to undermine knowledge-claims is a core means by which oppression operates (Ichikawa 2020). And that losing oneself in abstruse doubts about one's ability to see through ideology ends up just providing an excuse for perpetuating aforementioned ideology (Tilton forthcoming). On the more positive side it has been argued that knowledge is necessary for our collective flourishing (Kelp & Simion 2017). That it is through acknowledging the possession of probabilistic knowledge that we can explain why the systematic dismissal of women is so pernicious (Moss 2018). That recognising the oppressed's capacity for self-knowledge is an important part of doing justice to their experience (Srinivasan 2020). And that in any case all this focus on sceptical worries borne of ideology critique risks losing sight of the rather plain and open application of force and brutality in maintaining unjust social orders (Táíwò 2018). Knowledge is thus both abundant and good.

A stand of thought in analytic philosophy (and allied bits of cognitive psychology) thus runs sharply counter to the pessimistic picture I painted at first. Here our rational capacities are frequently well deployed, have delivered for us a rich and varied knowledge of our social and natural environment, and when enhanced through mass collaboration in science have allowed us to limn the foundation stones of reality. Not only is this good in itself, but that such knowledge is possible and in important cases actual is what secures the possibility of social progress, and allows us to identify harms we may redress. We can know, we must know, we shall know.

4. *Conclusion*

One wonders just why it is that analytic philosophy has developed a picture of the world so sharply different from the broader zeitgeist. I conclude with two speculations.

First is that the methodological insecurities of analytic philosophy actually prompt optimism more broadly. Even the most optimistic of us tend to be disappointed in what analytic philosophers have actually been up to — see e.g. Williamson 2006. But that then prompts the thought that where we seem to be failing it is probably just because we are not trying hard enough, or not applying ourselves properly. That is to say, if one tends to be methodologically self-critical in the way analytic philosophy is, I think it pairs naturally with an optimism about what could be done if only one got one's act together. After all, why else bother?

Second, analytic philosophy is unlike the sciences in not being able to rely on a general presumption that it is interesting and worth funding, nor in reliably producing technologies or medicines that may be patented. As such it perpetuates itself by appealing to the philanthropy of major capital (largely in the tech sector) on the one hand, and by taking part in the credentialing activities of modern neo-liberal universities on the other. Both of these groups tend towards technocratic sympathies by their nature. To deny the possibility of knowledge would be to cut off the hand that sustains us. One might rejoin that the rest of the humanities also face this situation yet are largely of the pessimistic camp — and I would agree, and note that most of the humanities are simply collapsing, while analytic philosophy retains healthy student interest.

Finally, for whatever it is worth, it seems to me that the analytic optimists are right about our individual level capacities. The case for scepticism about our rationality has been much overblown; frequently relying on overhyped and under-theorised results from psychology combined with tendencies towards dramatic overstatement prevalent in the humanities. However, at the social level the pessimists' case seems to me unanswered. While we live in a society wherein the rich and powerful have the means and incentive to subvert scientific inquiry and spread lies that better secure their own position I think there is only so much we can know. I hence am a social pessimist and individual optimist. Or, perhaps better put, I am a bounded optimist: we are rational within the bounds that our social structure permits us. Change the social structure and we may enlarge the sphere of our rational activity, and this would be to our very great good. Until such a happy day, however, I would recommend a humanistic attitude. One must maintain a faith in people and their potential, combined with a vow of enmity towards those powers that presently suppress and constrain all that is best in us.

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