Illusions of Rationality Confound Creative Potential

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ABSTRACT

Societies are constructed upon what their members perceive as reasonable bases. Over time the rational processes that emerge from this social arrangement become "taken for granted" and uncritically presumed. The study of intercultural communication encourages us to become more critical of this deeply rooted set of convictions, and nearly all textbooks in this area identify some pitfalls of a limited perspective about rationality. This paper will address some of the problems associated with illusions of rationality. It will first present an information-processing model of human behavior that frames the differences between rationality and creativity. On this basis it will then examine the constraints rationality can impose on our creative potential. Illustrations of the problems entailed are well reflected in recent literature that challenges an unwitting acceptance of rationality and that urges a reexamination of creativity as a promising social complement. A final section will explain how the study of intercultural communication can help us balance rationality and creativity more effectively. For a world threatened by social disintegration we seriously need to locate whatever creative ways might be feasible to disrupt the illusions of rationality and potentiate greater harmony among all people.

Have you ever noticed how we struggle to conform in the process of our formal education? I certainly have. As a high school and college debater I was compelled to think logically, suppress intuitive and emotional reactions, and disregard that which did not fit a rational system. Only years later did I realize that what did not fit that system often held answers to the problems addressed. In a similar fashion I worked very hard to obtain my doctoral degree, but it took me several years after the degree to break the bonds I had worked so hard to impose on my thinking. In fact, one of my fellow graduate students cynically explained a doctoral education as the demonstration of our ability to perform in ways that imitated our teachers and their work. Although unduly harsh, his comments indicated a pattern in all processes of socialization. We must learn how to behave, and what makes society possible is the construction of a social system that makes our world predictable, agreeable, and more stable. A theme in these efforts is being reasonable, that is, conforming to the established patterns. Especially as children we are constantly guided toward reason and its applications. Years later in moments of reflection we might discover how such guidance may have facilitated social harmony, but diminished our creativity by substituting some illusions of rationality. Restoring some balance between these essential aspects of our lives is the primary concern of this article.

During the twentieth century, varied perspectives about rationality and associated illusions have emerged. From the Western legacy, especially of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, attention has focused on the usefulness of reason to resolve social problems. The global tragedies of the early twentieth century confounded our commitments to a reified rationality, and many scholars and policy makers struggled to make sense of a world apparently gone berserk. The massive confrontation of the Cold War created an overly simplistic either/or world that conveniently distracted both sides about what we were actually doing to ourselves and to our world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union came a deceptive relief as we confronted the aftermath. Within this historical context Western societies, along with their disciples and critics, have confronted the dangers of science and over-reliance on analytical thinking, the consequences of greed and unbridled capitalism as sources of uncritically accepted assumptions for our reasoning processes, and the confounding efforts among the intelligentsia to sort the confusion. Postmodernists of all sorts have lashed out at institutions and their activities that were supposed to foster the reasonableness of our world. Unfortunately in their zeal they have over-reacted, thus compromising the potential value of their position and giving too little in return for their popularity. Somewhere between those who would reify rationality and those who reject the alleged ravages of excessive commitment to rationality lies a viable approach to alternatives. This restoration of balance can come in part from the study of intercultural communication.

To advance its position, this article will first provide a familiar framework from the study of intercultural communication. Questions for consideration in this section are what does the intercultural communication literature suggest about this topic, how might one pinpoint the problems, and how are the concerns reflected in the popular literature. From the discussion of these points will emerge an information-processing model of human behavior that will help us frame the differences between reasoning and creativity. A second section will turn to the more academic literature where the struggle is perhaps even more intense. Questions for this section concern the confrontation between postmodernists and enlightenment studies; the insights from psychology with its concerns for rationalization and creativity; and the potentially confounding ways that linguistic determinism frames the problem area. From this discussion an understanding of the deeply seated cultural foundations of the problem and its implications should emerge. A final section will pull these widely varied pieces together in an alternative perspective about the potential of intercultural communication study. The position of this paper is actually quite simple: We need to understand better the suppression of creativity by reason and the ways to achieve greater balance. Because of the relevance of cultural variance to these concerns, the study of intercultural communication may be best situated to assist with this understanding, and our host organization (IAICS) and its journal (ICS) provide us with the means to assist with these goals.

Framing the Conflict

Nearly all textbooks about intercultural communication address in one way or another the various perspectives about systems of logic, differences in argumentation, approaches to rationality, and other patterns of thought. In other words, the various worldviews involve different ways of thinking about what it means to be reasonable, how to behave reasonably, and how to translate these ideas into reasonable approaches to social action. Depending on the general perspective adopted by the author, textbooks may treat these concerns in varied ways. In their synthesis of the social scientific literature about intercultural communication, Gudykunst and Kim fit this subject into patterns of thought that they

subdivided into world view, systems of logic, and systems of reasoning (2003, pp. 205-209). The interrelationships among these three are such that they are separated "only to organize our discussion" (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p.205). In a parallel fashion from an alternative perspective, Chen and Starosta (1998, pp. 144-146) treat the subject as thinking patterns and draw upon different studies and examples to build their position. Resisting the dominance of the analytic, objective, rationality of social scientific study, some authors will focus more on the intuitive, subjective, and emotive personalization of the subject as a way to de-emphasize the Western tendency to use its careful analysis as a means of substituting one form of categorization for another. Whatever the approach or emphasis, the authors seem aware more or less explicitly of how reasoning may vary from culture to culture. What is unclear is whether these authors realize the implications of their positions for creativity. Whether differences exist about rationality among cultures is not the primary question. Instead, the question is what can we do with the varied positions about rationality to enhance our creativity.

Within the last few years at least two lines of thought have emerged in the more popular Western literature that encourage us to break free from restrictive ways of thinking in order to generate more creative options. The first, I would argue, comes from a trend in capitalist societies to locate more entrepreneurial and creative options to sustain a threatened system. At the intuitive level, it makes good sense to seek creative ways to foster success, but another outgrowth of this trend has revealed strong empirical evidence that rational, analytic approaches are only partial solutions, desperately in need of creative management. In their recent book *Innovations*, Lester and Piore (2004) provided some fascinating results of intensive study in three major areas of new product development: cell phones, medical devices, and denim garments. From this research they concluded that rational, analytic approaches, while crucial at certain stages, could also hinder creative productivity. As they searched for solutions they discovered the value of interpersonal communication among representatives of diverse points of view. In fact, they spent a significant portion of their book advancing the analogy of a successful executive becoming like the host of a cocktail party, getting the right people together, stimulating conversations about exciting and innovative ideas, and having the foresight to follow up on the ideas generated from such engagements. What excited me so much about this book was their re-discovery of the value of communication among varied perspectives and the creative potential that could result. Another illustration of this trend is the expansion of entrepreneurial centers on college campuses throughout the USA, especially in liberal arts universities where they are integrating the arts, sciences, and the humanities for more creative approaches to social concerns, only one of which is business. To me, all of this sounds a lot like what we are attempting to achieve in IAICS.

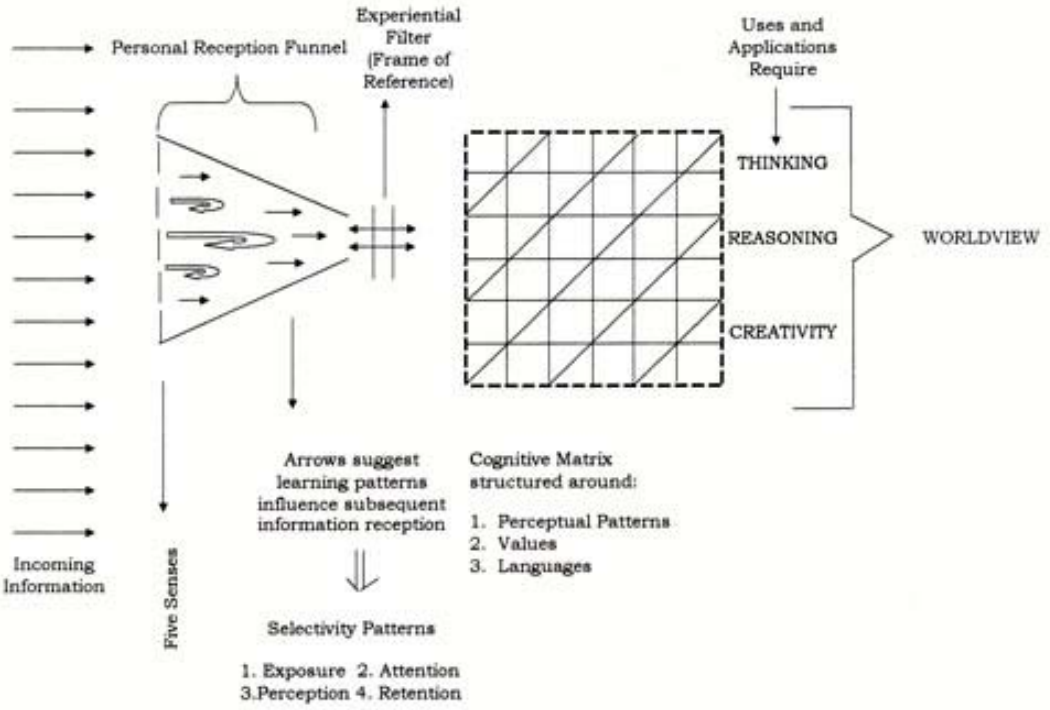
A second trend comes more from the social sciences. Instead of attacking the social scientific perspective, varied groups within that perspective are trying to complement the more analytic, objective, rational approaches with subjective, intuitive, and creative options. In the social sciences we have witnessed for the last few decades the emergence of "humanistic" variations that encourage scientists to supplement their work with elements of subjectivity and the idiosyncrasies of our humanity. Outside of the social sciences themselves more popular writers have also stepped forward to restore some balance to the exclusive use of rational approaches. Malcolm Gladwell of the *New York Times* reflects this trend in his recent book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005). Here and elsewhere he

argues for the value of a less rational and constrained, more intuitive response to situations we encounter. Drawing upon a wide diversity of literature, he builds a case that initial impressions are often well grounded and dependable in contrast to more consciously labored decisions. Obviously, this line of thought is fraught with problems, but he sidesteps these concerns by making "informed expertise" a foundation for successful impressions. To those of us who study non-verbal behavior we should not be shocked with several of his conclusions as he reports how touch by staff can reduce the patient's time in the hospital, how plaintiffs tend not to sue for malpractice a physician they perceive as warm and good-natured, and how experts can quickly discover a fake work of art. While his goal was not to foster creativity, Gladwell clearly indicates how we limit our thinking with rational constraints.

Concurrent with these trends I have struggled for several years to capture the relationship of reason and creativity within my linguistic and communication framework. A recent textbook developing an intercultural communication approach to the study and practice of international public relations afforded the opportunity to formulate this position more carefully (Hill & Dixon, 2005). The diagram on the next page is drawn from that textbook (p.72). It provides an information-processing model of human behavior and shows how the resulting processes of reason and creativity are inseparable parts of the matrix of human coping behaviors. This model indicates that we are constantly exposed to far more information than we could ever manage and that we funnel some of it through our perceptual system. In this process of information acquisition are developed the patterns of selectivity that we will cultivate for the rest of our lives. As we store, retrieve and otherwise process this information we create our cognitive framework around patterns of our perceptions, values, and language systems.

How we ultimately use the information in our cognitive matrix "involves how we relate the bits and pieces together to develop strategies and tactics for dealing with our world" (Hill &Dixon, 2005, p.73). More specifically and simply, thinking is the perception of relations between pieces of information, whether inside or outside of our system of thought. Reasoning is a type of thinking that conforms to predetermined and socially acceptable patterns. In contrast creativity is another form of thinking, but without predetermined patterns, and social acceptability may or may not be a concern.

What is not represented in this model is the relationship between reason and creativity. One can dangerously come to dominate the other and lead the person to adjustment difficulties. When these patterns of dominance become more widespread within a society, then the result can become a skewed perspective about the world and its operations. In fact, the literature will sometimes discuss the hemispheric perspective about left and right-brained people and their development of different cognitive styles. Whether this hemispheric position has genetic roots may be arguable, but the cultural influence on the patterns of dependence is certainly real. Whether the origins are bio-chemical and genetic, learned, or some combination is actually moot, however. What is more significant are the consequences. If we permit our concepts of reason, rationality, or logic to suppress our human tendencies for intuitive, subjective insights, we have limited our potential. This framework can help us better see the conflict, but to understand its origins in Western societies may help us understand how deeply rooted is our fascination with reason.



Information Processing - Worldview Model

Locating the Origins

How could Western societies develop such an overwhelming commitment to rationality? Despite tendencies of postmodernists to indict the Enlightenment period (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1987; Gray, 1995), the roots of these tendencies easily trace to the earliest stages of recorded Western civilization. From the ancient Greeks we received at least three strong motivations: (1) Knowledge was expansive and could be acquired from study of the external world, codified, and taught. (2) Knowledgeable people, whether citizens or simply the elite, could govern themselves. And (3) language and logic were necessary components of the other two motivations. What the Greeks initiated, the Romans further organized and expanded. Even with the varied philosophical and political variations prominent at different times, these three motivations constituted much of their legacy. With the ascendancy of Christianity, these three motivations were adapted to fit a narrower conception of knowledge. Rather than expansive and externally oriented, knowledge became more rationalistically confined to the Holy Bible. The shifting perceptions of mankind led to the substitution of authoritarianism for democratic tendencies.

The third motivation was well framed by Martianus Capella in the trivium of his seven liberal arts: rhetoric, grammar, and dialectic (Baldwin, 1928/59). In fact, Baldwin has traced the history of these Middle Ages in terms of the emphases on these three discursive aspects of the Greco-Roman educational system. During the first part of this era, rhetoric remained more prominent probably because of its deep entrenchment in the Roman educational system. The second part of this era saw less use for rhetoric as grammar and dialectic became more important for the exegeses of the scriptures and resolution of inconsistencies in the doctrine. Rhetoric's decline was primarily a result of the reduced need for public persuasion of the growing mass of poorly informed people and the increasing authoritarianism of the church. Grammar assumed greater importance as the Catholic Church struggled to render their doctrine and its narrative accounts more consistent and reasonable. As agreement emerged among the scholars and leaders of the church about the Holy Bible, dialectic in its sense of applied logic became more important for the codification and applications of religious doctrine.

Just as the Middle Ages could not escape the legacy of the Greco-Roman period, so the Renaissance of Greco-Roman thought could not escape the intense scholarship of the Middle Ages. Contrary to the impression of the Middle Ages as a dark period, the amazing work with semantic theory provides a window of many much later developments in language and logic studies (Cf. Kretzmann, 1967); for example, work in the Doctrine of Suppositions anticipates some concerns of the twentieth-century Doctrine of Illocutionary Forces (Austin, 1965) and Speech Act theories of meaning (e.g., Searle, 1969; Sadock, 1974). The concerns of Universal Grammar certainly surfaced among the rationalistic thinking of transformational-generative grammarians; even a brief review of Chomsky's work (1966) about the rationalistic roots of his position suggests the threads of a legacy traceable to the Middle Ages.

The expanding middle class, the increasing availability of written materials and literacy, and the shift of power away from the Church to secular leadership collectively began to erode the domination of Western thought by the Catholic Church. As people began to look more broadly for knowledge and truth, the scene was set for the resurgence of the three Greek and Roman motivations discussed earlier. This rebirth had the unusual benefit of the extensive work on language and logic by the Catholic scholars. As we move toward the Eighteenth

century in the West, the Greco-Roman motivations were advanced more intensively with skills and ideas available from the Middle Ages. Subsequent scientific success generally confirmed the directions of progress, as scholars began to imagine a body of integrated knowledge of logical purity reflected with mathematical precision. The Enlightenment funneled these trends into a perspective of a new world built on the advances of sciences, math, and logic. In the nineteenth century the expansion of science to enhance the study of human behavior created an illusion that our success could expand to conquer all sorts of social problems, as well as natural problems.

The global tragedies of World Wars, genocidal behavior, and intensive racism led people to question the vision of the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, too many of these critics used the Enlightenment as a target of criticism and neglected the complexities of our more deeply entrenched cultural problems drawn from throughout our social and intellectual history. By oversimplifying this critical perspective, we tended to establish false goals and misleading alternatives. Broader perspective confirms a cultural legacy of reason that embraces all of Western history and not simply its unfortunate over-extensions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Current trends in Enlightenment Studies may set the record straight (Cf. Darnton, 1997; Gordon, 2001), but the overreactions of postmodernism threaten to compromise the ever so important balance we need to maximize our potential. What we now need is to ferret out the ways language and logic have distorted our balance and to restore some faith in the qualities of our redirected legacy. In other words, now is the time to create a more balanced view of where we stand and how we might best advance. Habermas (1974) is certainly correct with his advocacy of a public sphere for discussion of our options. His position reminds one of the late Middle Ages when dialectic assumed a position of prominence followed with more emphasis on applied logic in more substantive rhetoric. These goals, if not the specifics, are not substantially different from what both Plato and Aristotle proposed, with one major difference. We now have the benefits and complications of mass communication and vast scientific progress that invite us to make this a global set of concerns, rather than a problem of Western societies. Within this new context we must build on our critical acuity and locate a more viable approach for our times.

The growth and development of social sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clearly demonstrated the Western commitment to rationality. With their growing dependence on the mathematical precision of probabilistic statistics and the increasing reliance on empirical study, we became more and more convinced of our ability not only to explain and predict human behavior, but our ability to control it as well. The grim realities of war and genocide shocked, but did not destroy our faith in science. Drawing on the principle of nullifiability we simply regrouped and rededicated our energies more tenaciously fostered in part by what we perceived as the abuse of reason by the enemies who used the discoveries of science for undesirable goals. With an overwhelming sense of rightness we defeated the enemy and attempted to restore our vision of a better world built on science and reason. Through all of the amazing thought processes of these turbulent times, we never fully realized the extent to which our approaches to human behavior were built on rational models confined according to the norms and standards of deviation. We could always explain the bizarre anti-social behavior in terms of their distance from the norms. Rarely did we check the presumptions that supported our models. We became masters at rationalization, with remarkable ability to justify our goals and actions with what we accepted to be reasonable. The rationalizations of our enemies were deviant and disregarded. Within this mental and

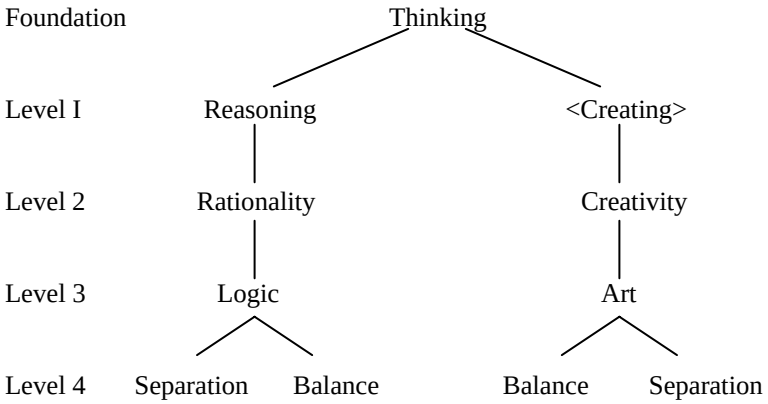
social perspective, differences became dangerous; as we tried to suppress these differences, we implicitly curbed the creative potential.

Some day someone will hopefully write a balanced, critical history of the origin, development, abuse, and realignment of the social and behavioral sciences. Perhaps by then we will have reduced much of our behavior to its chemical or genetic roots, but I suspect we will have discovered that irrationality is no longer a bad word, that it too grows out of our human coping tendencies, and that it is strongly correlated with creativity. In this vast work they will necessarily question the many presumptions that underlie the social sciences; among those presumptions will be the originating analogy that we can do with the study of human behavior what scientists do with the natural world, the problematic illusions of probabilistic statistics (Cf. Andreski, 1972), and the diminished concern for matters of moral philosophy from which the social sciences emerged. In this work they will likely discover the centrality of illusions about rationality, the distance between logic and psycho-logic, and the need for balance between reason and creativity.

The study and practice of language and logic has always been an essential element in our quest for knowledge. In fact, linguistics as an area of study provides a wonderful illustration of the problems of the social sciences in the twentieth century and earlier. Studied by many varied disciplines, linguistics has been proposed as a science by Chomsky and his disciples, as a social science within anthropology, sociology, psychology and communication, and as a humanistic study in philosophy, literature and modern languages. Whatever the vantage point, the lack of unified treatment of this subject has created serious obstacles for realizing its potential. Throughout the vagueness of linguistic history, we have too often neglected the rationality inherent to our subject and our treatment of it. Current social science research and years of philosophy of language studies acknowledge how verbalization fosters an analytic mode. In fact, much of the twentieth-century philosophy of language has focused on the use of language as a means for analysis of philosophical issues. Logical positivism or empiricism took one route and analytic philosophy or ordinary language philosophy took another, but both recognized the varied relations of language to our rationality. Even more revealing, recent work in communication (McGlone, Kobrynowicz, & Alexander, 2005) suggests that verbalization is so correlated with analysis that our linguistic behavior constrains our potential to deal with the more creative aspects of our conceptual world. Thus our use of language is so tied to our rational, logical tendencies that we have serious difficulty talking about and tend to compromise our subjective, intuitive experiences. If we examine some of our more creative literary figures, we can see their strength with the use of language was to capture the creative without at the same time compromising the quality of the creative. As we think about the relevance of our own areas of study to the central problem of this paper, we can anticipate some of the perspective in the following section.

Restoring the Balance

So far in this paper, I have resisted the temptation to define more carefully the central terms employed. Instead, I have simply worked them into the general discussion to foster resonance in your thinking about them. Now we need to formulate some definitions as a useful step toward restoration of a social balance between rationality and creativity. The following schemata grows out of the information processing model presented earlier and visually identifies several points of contention:



Drawing upon the earlier model, "thinking" is the basic application of our information processing capabilities as we cope with our world. It simply involves the perception of relations among pieces of information, either within our cognitive system or from the outside world into our cognitive system. When we "reason" we think according to predetermined and socially acceptable patterns. Notice how the schemata bracketed the counterpart of reasoning at Level 1. If we fill out this analogue, however, we should add "creating" as a counterpart for reasoning as the thinking process unhampered by predetermined patterns or social acceptability. This tendency to skip "creating" and move directly to creativity seems to underscore that creating might be an extension of thinking with the potential of producing results that are either reasonable or creative. We do not want, it would appear, to deprive reasoning of a creative base. Notice, however, that we seem more comfortable with movement from thinking to creativity without going through "reasoning."

This semantic consideration may appear to some as "mere semantic play." I would argue that this glitch in my analogy is much more than "mere semantics." Consider, for example, the teacher of English composition and rhetoric. This teacher often wants to inspire creativity in writing without burdening the student with syntax and other reasonable rules of grammar. In other words, the teacher is implicitly saying to the student, let's jump into written composition at the creative level without careful attention to the rules and norms of expository discourse. This tendency often produces an uninformed student struggling to be creative without potential awareness of when they might have found it. Even though this approach may actually produce creative results, the greater likelihood is confusion. The creative person may well recognize that the crucial activities at Level 1, that is the activities of reasoning and creating, actually employ each other. That is to say, good reasoning might valuably have a creative aspect, and on parallel creative work grows out of reasoning as we knowingly deviate from the rules. T.S. Elliot and James Joyce did not simply stumble serendipitously upon their creative works. They knew well the rules and like many great poets, they discovered how to deviate constructively to generate, i.e., create, new linguistic possibilities. Just as a metaphor can become commonplace and expand our basic vocabulary, it began with the creative recognition of a novel way of sensing or perceiving some phenomena.

Going back to the definitional scheme, rationality is a set of reasonable patterns for processing information and with expansion becomes a platform that informs our doctrines, ideologies, and worldview. Based upon this platform, we refine our reasonable procedures

into logical systems that we use, in turn, to explain, predict, and control our application of rationality to reality. The application process involves our rhetorical development of argument or a practical line of reasoning directed to a predetermined end. The process of arguing and argumentation draws upon our platform of rationality and system of logic to use rhetorically our reasonableness to persuade others of the rightfulness of our views and doctrines.

Predictably as we move through the levels of the creative side of the definitional schemata, we have less precise relations. Thinking may lead directly to creating, but as suggested above, doing so without some awareness of reasoning is questionable, if possible. We do not tend to think of "creating" building on "reasoning," but we have no trouble thinking about reasoning building upon the creative process at this preliminary level. Obviously creativity builds upon creating, but we often jump "creating" and move directly into creativity, perhaps because we like to think of creating being fundamental to both creativity and the rational processes. Whatever the connection might be among these terms, and more importantly, whatever the implications of these relations, we accept uncritically that creativity builds on creative processes, whether we call these processes "creating" or ways of sensing/perceiving. Creativity, unlike rationality is much less codified, almost as a reaction against the predetermined nature of rationality. This may be, however, another illusion. Is creativity as codifiable as rationality? Is creativity teachable, as is rationality? Some might argue no, but I suspect the answer to both questions is a qualified yes. Consider, for example, a creative painter. With rare exception this artist has learned a skill codified over many years by other artisans. What makes this person creative is their mastery of the skills and their ingenious deviations. From this perspective creativity, like rationality, builds on codifiable patterns but strives to bend and break the mold rather than make it permanent. Most painters will achieve a level of compliance with what they are taught and create respectable products, but only a few will escape these constraints to become creative.

Corresponding to logic is art on the creative side of this definitional scheme. Like logic, art represents the focused systematization of its prior level creativity in developing a system for refinement and application of these creative processes within a given domain. What I find most striking and sometimes amazing is that confrontations in the art world parallel the conflicts in the world of logic. In the performing and visual arts we discover internecine conflict over what constitutes legitimacy, how the support system fosters or suppresses one or another point of view. Beyond these humane tendencies, art like logic is a framework that fosters patterns and norms, is codifiable, and diverts attention away from their constituent and more fundamental processes. An interesting semantic question at this third level is that we have no trouble referencing multiple arts, but we seemed puzzled when someone speaks of multiple logics. Perhaps the appropriate response here is we should consider both as both; i.e., we need to think of art as comprehensive and embracing all arts as we think of logic as a vast system. We should also think of logic as consisting of multiple systems, as we comfortably think of art with its many constituent types. Perhaps this broadening can help us develop a more balanced perspective. Here again, the language we use may impede the expansion of our ways of thinking—certainly this is more than "mere semantics."

What we need to restore balance of the rational and creative sides of our humanity is first to identify the illusions we develop that conceal the problems and secondly to benefit from the integration of Eastern and Western perspectives. In this paper I have indicated that the Western legacy of rationality and logic is a deeply rooted cultural phenomenon strongly

tied to our linguistic developments. We cannot merely accept the over-simplification of post modernism; instead, we need to pursue more basic alternatives and not use our critical perspectives to foster merely a philosophical rejection of one or another political biases. For me this result will come from genuine dialogue among people from throughout our world of genuinely diverse points of view. This dialogue can help them learn not only the great power of our rational system, but also its deceptive side. From them perhaps we can learn more about a restoration of balance between the essential forces of rationality and creativity.

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