Rational Thought Resolves Differences Peacefully

By Roy Minet (Rev. 12/20/17)

These days, people are so strongly polarized on key issues that attempts to discuss them often escalate quickly to acrimony. Even good friends and families learn to avoid certain topics so as to keep their gatherings cordial. This certainly is uncomfortable and it definitely impedes making "progress" toward resolving such issues.

The intense polarization in our society has reached unhealthy and perhaps unprecedented levels. What might be done to defuse this serious problem?

When two individuals or groups disagree about something, there are only three things they can do.

First, they can "agree to disagree" and walk away. This may occur after a little or a lot of unproductive argument. Of course, the issue has not been resolved and will return to haunt. The vast majority of disagreements follow this path of inaction.

Second, the stronger side could use force to impose its view upon the weaker side. The weaker side may still harbor its "incorrect" (now repressed) view, so a longer-lasting resolution may require "elimination" of the weaker side. History is replete with examples, ranging from two-person duels to persecution, religious crusades and wars.

Third, both sides could agree to settle their issue(s) by employing rational thought. This is the *only* path guaranteed to actually resolve an issue – that is, both sides end up in agreement – and to resolve it peacefully (zero use of force)!

"Sheeesh," you ask, "why don't people always employ rational thought to settle their differences?" The two main reasons boil down to ignorance and laziness. But before explaining further, we need a more complete definition of "rational thought."

As a prerequisite, all parties must be cognizant of the demonstrable fact that there is a single objective reality which is the same for everybody. With some work, we can discover and understand many of the basic principles which govern our reality. Building upon basic principles with sound logic, we can deduce higher-level conclusions regarding how things work. This process is often complex and conclusions can sometimes be counterintuitive.

If two parties disagree about some aspect of reality, they can't both be right. Of course, they might both be wrong, but at most one of them can be right.

The beautiful thing is that any such "dispute" can substantially always be cleared up peacefully and conclusively. Cooperatively, both parties can go back to basic principles and review each logic step (correcting any mistakes) until a conclusion is reached. Both must then agree with that conclusion.

Additionally, a test might be devised to prove which conclusion actually is consistent with reality. Such a test or logic process can be duplicated by any rational person anywhere to verify the result.

Should verification fail, we know we must look for the mistake(s) in the (current or original) test design or logic. For complex cases, this could indeed be a long, arduous process.

It's probably obvious that the above describes what is commonly called "the scientific method." Undeniably, rational thinking in the "scientific disciplines" has demonstrated spectacular success and has produced fantastic benefits.

But rational thought does not just apply to "science." It is universal and applies to everything everywhere. There is no "boundary" walling off "science" from everything else, within which rational thought applies and outside of which it does not.

Of course, we cannot settle differences in personal preference (you want to paint the room blue, but your partner likes green). We deal only with disputes over our shared reality (increasing the minimum wage will/will not increase unemployment).

Most people just don't know much about rational thought. The fact that schools seldom specifically teach and don't consistently emphasize these fundamentally important concepts is one obvious cause. Being surrounded by others in the same boat doesn't help.

Of those who vaguely recognize that rational thought is important, many will have nothing to do with it. "That's just scientific stuff and science is not my thing," is their excuse.

Of the dwindling remaining group, who do understand the concept and its importance, few apparently are willing to put forth the required effort. Digging a ditch by hand is hard physical work. Rational thinking usually is equally difficult mental work. You must focus hard on a thorny problem for a sustained time and commit to carefully reasoning it all the way through. In our age of flashing screens and short attention spans, vanishingly few are able and willing to tackle the hard work of rational thought.

So, sadly, there are precious few consistently rational thinkers.

Overwhelmingly, people have little appreciation for basic principles. They adopt issue positions fairly indiscriminately: because it "feels" or "sounds" right; it's what their friends think; their church or political party told them so; even just because they heard it fifty times in a catchy sound bite. Or they are willing to believe things as a matter of faith, which by its very definition is not rational.

If peace on earth is ever to be achieved, less irrationality and more rationality will be necessary. Until we have more rational thinkers, or at least more people who appreciate, respect and value the process, we'll continue to have lots of strong polarization, irrational shouting, acrimony and unresolved issues.

Happy holidays!