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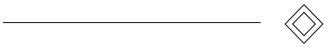
Master Your Emotional Self



The Law of Irrationality

You like to imagine yourself in control of your fate, consciously planning the course of your life as best you can. But you are largely unaware of how deeply your emotions dominate you. They make you veer toward ideas that soothe your ego. They make you look for evidence that confirms what you already want to believe. They make you see what you want to see, depending on your mood, and this disconnect from reality is the source of the bad decisions and negative patterns that haunt your life. Rationality is the ability to counteract these emotional effects, to think instead of react, to open your mind to what is really happening, as opposed to what you are feeling. It does not come naturally; it is a power we must cultivate, but in doing so we realize our greatest potential.

The Inner Athena

One day toward the end of the year 432 BC, the citizens of Athens received some very disturbing news: representatives from the city-state of Sparta had arrived in town and presented to the Athenian governing council new terms of peace. If Athens did not agree to these terms, then Sparta would declare war. Sparta was Athens's archenemy and in many ways its polar opposite. Athens led a league of democratic states in the region, while Sparta led a confederation of oligarchies, known as the Peloponnesians. Athens depended on its navy and on its wealth—it was the preeminent commercial power in the Mediterranean. Sparta depended on its army. It was a total military state. Up until then, the two powers had largely avoided a direct war because the consequences could be devastating—not only could the defeated side lose its

influence in the region, but its whole way of life could be put in jeopardy—certainly for Athens its democracy and its wealth. Now, however, war seemed inevitable and a sense of impending doom quickly settled on the city.

A few days later, the Athenian Assembly met on the Pnyx Hill overlooking the Acropolis to debate the Spartan ultimatum and decide what to do. The Assembly was open to all male citizens, and on that day close to ten thousand of them crowded on the hill to participate in the debate. The hawks among them were in a state of great agitation—Athens should seize the initiative and attack Sparta first, they said. Others reminded them that in a land battle the Spartan forces were nearly unbeatable. Attacking Sparta in this way would play straight into their hands. The doves were all in favor of accepting the peace terms, but as many pointed out, that would only show fear and embolden the Spartans. It would only give them more time to enlarge their army. Back and forth went the debate, with emotions getting heated, people shouting, and no satisfactory solution in sight.

Then toward the end of the afternoon, the crowd suddenly grew quiet as a familiar figure stepped forward to address the Assembly. This was Pericles, the elder statesman of Athenian politics, now over sixty years old. Pericles was beloved, and his opinion would matter more than anyone's, but despite the Athenians' respect for him, they found him a very peculiar leader—more of a philosopher than a politician. To those old enough to remember the start of his career, it was truly surprising how powerful and successful he had become. He did nothing the usual way.

In the earliest years of their democracy, before Pericles had appeared on the scene, the Athenians had preferred a certain personality type in their leaders—men who could give an inspiring, persuasive speech and had a flair for drama. On the battlefield these men were risk takers; they often pushed for military campaigns that they could lead, giving them a chance to gain glory and attention. They advanced their careers by representing some faction in the Assembly—landowners, soldiers, aristocrats—and doing everything they could to further its interests. This led to highly divisive politics. Leaders would rise and fall in cycles of a few years, but the Athenians were fine with this; they mistrusted anyone who lasted long in power.

Then Pericles entered public life around 463 BC, and Athenian politics would never be the same. His first move was the most unusual of all. Although he came from an illustrious aristocratic family, he allied himself with the growing lower and middle classes of the city—farmers, oarsmen in the navy, the craftsmen who were the pride of Athens. He worked to increase their voice in the Assembly and give them greater power in the democracy. This was not some small faction he now led but the majority of Athenian citizens. It would seem impossible to control such a large, unruly mob of men, with their varied interests, but he was so fervent in increasing their power that he slowly gained their trust and backing.

As his influence grew, he started to assert himself in the Assembly and alter its policies. He argued against expanding Athens's democratic empire. He feared the Athenians would overreach and lose control. He worked to consolidate the empire and strengthen existing alliances. When it came to war and to serving as a general, he strove to limit campaigns and to win through maneuvers, with minimal loss of lives. To many this seemed unheroic, but as these policies took effect, the city entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. There were no more needless wars to drain the coffers, and the empire was functioning more smoothly than ever.

What Pericles did with the growing surplus of money startled and amazed the citizenry: instead of using it to buy political favors, he initiated a massive public building project in Athens. He commissioned temples, theaters, and concert halls, putting all of the Athenian craftsmen to work. Everywhere one looked, the city was becoming more sublimely beautiful. He favored a form of architecture that reflected his personal aesthetics—ordered, highly geometric, monumental yet soothing to the eye. His greatest commission was that of the Parthenon, with its enormous forty-foot statue of Athena. Athena was the guiding spirit of Athens, the goddess of wisdom and practical intelligence. She represented all of the values Pericles wanted to promote. Singlehandedly Pericles had transformed the look and spirit of Athens, and it entered a golden age in all of the arts and sciences.

What was perhaps the strangest quality of Pericles was his speaking style—restrained and dignified. He did not go in for the usual flights of rhetoric. Instead, he worked to convince an audience through airtight

arguments. This would make people listen closely, as they followed the interesting course of his logic. The style was compelling and calming.

Unlike any of the other leaders, Pericles remained in power year after year, decade after decade, putting his total stamp on the city in his quiet, unobtrusive way. He had his enemies. This was inevitable. He had stayed in power so long that many accused him of being a secret dictator. He was suspected of being an atheist, a man who scoffed at all traditions. That would explain why he was so peculiar. But nobody could argue against the results of his leadership.

And so now, as he began to address the Assembly that afternoon, his opinion on war with Sparta would carry the most weight, and a hush came over the crowd as they anxiously waited to hear his argument.

"Athenians," he began, "my views are the same as ever: I am against making any concessions to the Peloponnesians, even though I am aware that the enthusiastic state of mind in which people are persuaded to enter upon a war is not retained when it comes to action, and that people's minds are altered by the course of events." Differences between Athens and Sparta were supposed to be settled through neutral arbitrators, he reminded them. It would set a dangerous precedent if they gave in to the Spartans' unilateral demands. Where would it end? Yes, a direct land battle with Sparta would be suicide. What he proposed instead was a completely novel form of warfare—limited and defensive.

He would bring within the walls of Athens all those living in the area. Let the Spartans come and try to lure us into fighting, he said; let them lay waste to our lands. We will not take the bait; we will not fight them on land. With our access to the sea we will keep the city supplied. We will use our navy to raid their coastal towns. As time goes on, they will grow frustrated by the lack of battle. Having to feed and supply their standing army, they will run out of money. Their allies will bicker among themselves. The war party within Sparta will be discredited and a real lasting peace will be agreed upon, all with minimal expenditure of lives and money on our part.

"I could give you many other reasons," he concluded, "why you should feel confident in ultimate victory, if only you will make up your minds not to add to the empire while the war is in progress, and not to go out of your way to involve yourselves in new perils. What I fear is

not the enemy's strategy but our own mistakes." The novelty of what he was proposing aroused great debate. Neither hawks nor doves were satisfied with his plan, but in the end, his reputation for wisdom carried the day and his strategy was approved. Several months later the fateful war began.

In the beginning, all did not proceed as Pericles had envisioned. The Spartans and their allies did not grow frustrated as the war dragged on, but only bolder. The Athenians were the ones to become discouraged, seeing their lands destroyed without retaliation. But Pericles believed his plan could not fail as long as the Athenians remained patient. Then, in the second year of the war, an unexpected disaster upended everything: a powerful plague entered the city; with so many people packed within the walls it spread quickly, killing over one third of the citizenry and decimating the ranks of the army. Pericles himself caught the disease, and as he lay dying he witnessed the ultimate nightmare: all that he had done for Athens over so many decades seemed to unravel at once, the people descending into group delirium until it was every man for himself. If he had survived, he almost certainly would have found a way to calm the Athenians down and broker an acceptable peace with Sparta, or adjust his defensive strategy, but now it was too late.

Strangely enough, the Athenians did not mourn for their leader. They blamed him for the plague and railed at the ineffectiveness of his strategy. They were not in a mood anymore for patience or restraint. He had outlived his time, and his ideas were now seen as the tired reactions of an old man. Their love of Pericles had turned to hate. With him no longer there, the factions returned with a vengeance. The war party became popular. The party fed off the people's growing bitterness toward the Spartans, who had used the plague to advance their positions. The hawks promised they would regain the initiative and crush the Spartans with an offensive strategy. For many Athenians, such words came as a great relief, a release of pent-up emotions.

As the city slowly recovered from the plague, the Athenians managed to gain the upper hand, and the Spartans sued for peace. Wanting to completely defeat their enemy, the Athenians pressed their advantage, only to find the Spartans recover and turn the tables. Back and forth it went, year after year. The violence and bitterness on both sides increased. At one point Athens attacked the island of Melos, a Spartan ally, and when the Melians surrendered, the Athenians voted

to kill all of their men and sell the women and children into slavery. Nothing remotely like this had ever happened under Pericles.

Then, after so many years of a war without end, in 415 BC several Athenian leaders had an interesting idea about how to deliver the fatal blow. The city-state of Syracuse was the rising power on the island of Sicily. Syracuse was a critical ally of the Spartans, supplying them with much-needed resources. If the Athenians, with their great navy, could launch an expedition and take control of Syracuse, they would gain two advantages: it would add to their empire, and it would deprive Sparta of the resources it needed to continue the war. The Assembly voted to send sixty ships with an appropriate-sized army on board to accomplish this goal.

One of the commanders assigned to this expedition, Nicias, had great doubts as to the wisdom of this plan. He feared the Athenians were underestimating the strength of Syracuse. He laid out all of the possible negative scenarios; only a much larger expedition could ensure victory. He wanted to squelch the plan, but his argument had the opposite effect. If a larger expedition was necessary, then that was what they would send—one hundred ships and double the number of soldiers. The Athenians smelled victory in this strategy and nothing would deter them.

In the ensuing days, Athenians of all ages could be seen in the streets drawing maps of Sicily, dreaming of the riches that would pour into Athens and the final humiliation of the Spartans. The day of the launching of the ships turned into a great holiday and the most awe-inspiring spectacle they had ever seen—an enormous armada filling the harbor as far as the eye could see, the ships beautifully decorated, the soldiers, glistening in their armor, crowding the decks. It was a dazzling display of the wealth and power of Athens.

As the months went by, the Athenians desperately sought news of the expedition. At one point, through the sheer size of the force, it seemed that Athens had gained the advantage and had laid siege to Syracuse. But at the last moment, reinforcements arrived from Sparta, and now the Athenians were on the defensive. Nicias sent off a letter to the Assembly describing this negative turn of events. He recommended either giving up and returning to Athens, or the sending of reinforcements right away. Unwilling to believe in the possibility of defeat, the Athenians voted to send reinforcements—a second armada

of ships almost as large as the first. In the months after this, the Athenians' anxiety reached new heights—for now the stakes had been doubled and Athens could not afford to lose.

One day a barber in Athens's port town of Piraeus heard a rumor from a customer that the Athenian expedition, every ship and almost every man, had been wiped out in battle. The rumor quickly spread to Athens. It was hard to believe, but slowly panic set in. A week later the rumor was confirmed and Athens seemed doomed, drained of money, ships, and men.

Miraculously, the Athenians managed to hold on. But over the next few years, severely imbalanced by the losses in Sicily, they staggered from one reeling blow to another, until finally in 405 BC Athens suffered its final loss and was forced to agree to the harsh terms of peace imposed by Sparta. Their years of glory, their great democratic empire, the Periclean golden age were now and forever over. The man who had curbed their most dangerous emotions—aggression, greed, hubris, selfishness—had been gone from the scene for too long, his wisdom long forgotten.

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Interpretation: As Pericles surveyed the political scene early in his career, he noticed the following phenomenon: Every Athenian political figure believed he was rational, had realistic goals, and plans on how to get there. They all worked hard for their political factions and tried to increase their power. They led Athenian armies into battle and often came out ahead. They strove to expand the empire and bring in more money. And when their political maneuvering suddenly backfired, or the wars turned out badly, they had excellent reasons for why this had happened. They could always blame the opposition or, if need be, the gods. And yet, if all these men were so rational, why did their policies add up to so much chaos and self-destructiveness? Why was Athens such a mess and the democracy itself so fragile? Why was there so much corruption and turbulence? The answer was simple: his fellow Athenians were not rational at all, merely selfish and shrewd. What guided their decisions was their base emotions—hunger for power, attention, and money. And for those purposes they could be very tactical and clever, but none of their maneuvers led to anything that lasted or served the overall interests of the democracy.

What consumed Pericles as a thinker and a public figure was how to get out of this trap, how to be truly rational in an arena dominated by emotions. The solution he came up with is unique in history and devastatingly powerful in its results. It should serve as our ideal. In his conception, the human mind has to worship something, has to have its attention directed to something it values above all else. For most people, it is their ego; for some it is their family, their clan, their god, or their nation. For Pericles it would be *nous*, the ancient Greek word for "mind" or "intelligence." *Nous* is a force that permeates the universe, creating meaning and order. The human mind is naturally attracted to this order; this is the source of our intelligence. For Pericles, the *nous* that he worshipped was embodied in the figure of the goddess Athena.

Athena was literally born from the head of Zeus, her name itself reflecting this—a combination of "god" (*theos*) and "mind" (*nous*). But Athena came to represent a very particular form of *nous*—eminently practical, feminine, and earthy. She is the voice that comes to heroes in times of need, instilling in them a calm spirit, orienting their minds toward the perfect idea for victory and success, then giving them the energy to achieve this. To be visited by Athena was the highest blessing of them all, and it was her spirit that guided great generals and the best artists, inventors, and tradesmen. Under her influence, a man or woman could see the world with perfect clarity and hit upon the action that was just right for the moment. For Athens, her spirit was invoked to unify the city, make it prosperous and productive. In essence, Athena stood for rationality, the greatest gift of the gods to mortals, for it alone could make a human act with divine wisdom.

To cultivate his inner Athena, Pericles first had to find a way to master his emotions. Emotions turn us inward, away from *nous*, away from reality. We dwell on our anger or our insecurities. If we look out at the world and try to solve problems, we see things through the lens of these emotions; they cloud our vision. Pericles trained himself to never react in the moment, to never make a decision while under the influence of a strong emotion. Instead, he analyzed his feelings. Usually when he looked closely at his insecurities or his anger, he saw that they were not really justified, and they lost their significance under scrutiny. Sometimes he had to physically get away from the heated Assembly and retire to his house, where he remained alone for

days on end, calming himself down. Slowly, the voice of Athena would come to him.

He decided to base all of his political decisions on one thing—what actually served the greater good of Athens. His goal was to unify the citizenry through genuine love of democracy and belief in the superiority of the Athenian way. Having such a standard helped him avoid the ego trap. It impelled him to work to increase the participation and power of the lower and middle classes, even though such a strategy could easily turn against him. It inspired him to limit wars, even though this meant less personal glory for him. And finally it led to his greatest decision of all—the public works project that transformed Athens.

To help himself in this deliberative process, he opened his mind to as many ideas and options as possible, even to those of his opponents. He imagined all of the possible consequences of a strategy before committing to it. With a calm spirit and an open mind, he hit upon policies that sparked one of the true golden ages in history. One man was able to infect an entire city with his rational spirit. What happened to Athens after he departed from the scene speaks for itself. The Sicilian expedition represented everything he had always opposed—a decision secretly motivated by the desire to grab more land, blinded to its potential consequences.

Understand: Like everyone, you think you are rational, but you are not. Rationality is not a power you are born with but one you acquire through training and practice. The voice of Athena simply stands for a higher power that exists within you right now, a potential you have perhaps felt in moments of calmness and focus, the perfect idea coming to you after much thinking. You are not connected to this higher power in the present because your mind is weighed down with emotions. Like Pericles in the Assembly, you are infected by all of the drama that others churn up; you are continually reacting to what people give you, experiencing waves of excitement, insecurity, and anxiety that make it hard to focus. Your attention is pulled this way and that, and without the rational standard to guide your decisions, you never quite reach the goals that you set. At any moment this can change with a simple decision—to cultivate your inner Athena. Rationality is then what you will value the most and that which will serve as your guide.

Your first task is to look at those emotions that are continually infecting your ideas and decisions. Learn to question yourself: Why this anger or resentment? Where does this incessant need for attention come from? Under such scrutiny, your emotions will lose their hold on you. You will begin to think for yourself instead of reacting to what others give you. Emotions tend to narrow the mind, making us focus on one or two ideas that satisfy our immediate desire for power or attention, ideas that usually backfire. Now, with a calm spirit, you can entertain a wide range of options and solutions. You will deliberate longer before acting and reassess your strategies. The voice will become clearer and clearer. When people besiege you with their endless dramas and petty emotions, you will resent the distraction and apply your rationality to think past them. Like an athlete continually getting stronger through training, your mind will become more flexible and resilient. Clear and calm, you will see answers and creative solutions that no one else can envision.

> It's just as though one's second self were standing beside one; one is sensible and rational oneself, but the other self is impelled to do something perfectly senseless, and sometimes very funny; and suddenly you notice that you are longing to do that amusing thing, goodness knows why; that is, you want to, as it were, against your will; though you fight against it with all of your might, you want to.
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> —Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *A Raw Youth*

Keys to Human Nature

Whenever anything goes wrong in our life, we naturally seek an explanation. To not find some cause for why our plans went awry, or why we faced sudden resistance to our ideas, would be deeply disturbing to us and intensify our pain. But in looking for a cause, our minds tend to revolve around the same types of explanations: someone or some group sabotaged me, perhaps out of dislike; large antagonistic forces out there, such as the government or social conventions, hindered me; I received bad advice, or information was kept from me. Finally—if worse comes to worst—it was all bad luck and unfortunate circumstances.

These explanations generally emphasize our helplessness. "What could I have done differently? How could I have possibly foreseen the nasty actions of X against me?" They are also somewhat vague. We usually can't point to specific malicious actions of others. We can only suspect or imagine. These explanations tend to intensify our emotions

—anger, frustration, depression—which we can then wallow in and feel bad for ourselves. Most significantly, our first reaction is to look outward for the cause. Yes, we might be responsible for some of what happened, but for the most part, other people and antagonistic forces tripped us up. This reaction is deeply ingrained in the human animal. In ancient times, it might have been the gods or evil spirits who were to blame. We of the present choose to call them other names.

The truth, however, is very different from this. Certainly there are individuals and larger forces out there that continually have an effect on us, and there is much we cannot control in the world. But generally what causes us to go astray in the first place, what leads to bad decisions and miscalculations, is our deep-rooted irrationality, the extent to which our minds are governed by emotion. We cannot see this. It is our blind spot, and as exhibit A of this blind spot, let's look at the crash of 2008, which can serve as a compendium of all varieties of human irrationality.

In the aftermath of the crash, the following were the most common explanations in the media for what had happened: trade imbalances and other factors led to cheap credit in the early 2000s, which led to excess leverage; it was impossible to place accurate value on the highly complex derivatives that were being traded, so no one really could gauge profits and losses; there existed a shrewd and corrupt cabal of insiders who had incentives to manipulate the system for quick profits; greedy lenders pushed subprime mortgages on unsuspecting homeowners; there was too much government regulation; there was not enough government oversight; computer models and trading systems ran amok.

These explanations reveal a remarkable denial of a basic reality. Leading up to the crash of 2008, millions of people made daily decisions on whether to invest or not invest. At each point of these transactions, buyers and sellers could have pulled back from the riskiest forms of investment but decided not to. There were plenty of people out there warning of a bubble. Only a few years before, the crash of the giant hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management showed exactly how a larger crash could and would occur. If people had longer memories, they could think back to the bubble of 1987; if they read history, the stock market bubble and crash of 1929. Almost any potential homeowner can understand the risks of no-money-down mortgages and lending terms with fast-rising interest rates.

What all of the analysis ignores is the basic irrationality that drove these millions of buyers and sellers up and down the line. They became infected with the lure of easy money. This made even the most educated investor emotional. Studies and experts were pulled in to bolster ideas that people were already disposed to believe in—such as the proverbial "this time it's different" and "housing prices never go down." A wave of unbridled optimism swept through masses of people. Then came the panic and crash and the ugly confrontation with reality. Instead of coming to terms with the orgy of speculation that had overwhelmed one and all, making smart people look like idiots, fingers were pointed at outside forces, anything to deflect the real source of the madness. This is not something peculiar to the crash of 2008. The same types of explanations were trotted out after the crashes of 1987 and 1929, the railway mania in the 1840s in England, and the South Sea bubble of the 1720s, also in England. People spoke of reforming the system; laws were passed to limit speculation. And none of this worked.

Bubbles occur because of the intense emotional pull they have on people, which overwhelms any reasoning powers an individual mind might possess. They stimulate our natural tendencies toward greed, easy money, and quick results. It is hard to see other people making money and not join in. There is no regulatory force on the planet that can control human nature. And because we do not confront the real source of the problem, bubbles and crashes keep repeating, and will keep repeating as long as there are suckers and people who do not read history. The recurrence of this mirrors the recurrence in our own lives of the same problems and mistakes, forming negative patterns. It is hard to learn from experience when we are not looking inward, at the true causes.

Understand: The first step toward becoming rational is to understand our *fundamental irrationality*. There are two factors that should render this more palatable to our egos: nobody is exempt from the irresistible effect of emotions on the mind, not even the wisest among us; and to some extent irrationality is a function of the structure of our brains and is wired into our very nature by the way we process emotions. Being irrational is almost beyond our control. To understand this, we must look at the evolution of emotions themselves.

For millions of years, living organisms depended on finely tuned instincts for survival. In a split second, a reptile could sense danger in

the environment and respond with an instantaneous flight from the scene. There was no separation between impulse and action. Then, slowly, for some animals this sensation evolved into something larger and longer—a feeling of fear. In the beginning this fear merely consisted of a high level of arousal with the release of certain chemicals, alerting the animal to a possible danger. With this arousal and the attention that came with it, the animal could respond in several ways instead of just one. It could become more sensitive to the environment and learn. It stood a better chance of survival because its options were widened. This sensation of fear would last only a few seconds or even less, for speed was of the essence.

For social animals, these arousals and feelings took on a deeper and more important role: they became a critical form of communication. Vicious sounds or hair standing on end could display anger, warding off an enemy or signaling a danger; certain postures or smells revealed sexual desire and readiness; postures and gestures signaled the desire to play; certain calls from the young revealed deep anxiety and the need for the mother to return. With primates, this became ever more elaborate and complex. It has been shown that chimpanzees can feel envy and the desire for vengeance, among other emotions. This evolution took place over the course of hundreds of millions of years. Much more recently, cognitive powers developed in animals and humans, culminating in the invention of language and abstract thinking.

As many neuroscientists have affirmed, this evolution has led to the higher mammalian brain being composed of three parts. The oldest is the reptilian part of the brain, which controls all automatic responses that regulate the body. This is the instinctive part. Above that is the old mammalian or limbic brain, governing feeling and emotion. And on top of that has evolved the neocortex, the part that controls cognition and, for humans, language.

Emotions originate as physical arousal designed to capture our attention and cause us to take notice of something around us. They begin as chemical reactions and sensations that we must then translate into words to try to understand. But because they are processed in a different part of the brain from language and thinking, this translation is often slippery and inaccurate. For instance, we feel anger at person X, whereas in fact the true source of this may be envy; below the level of conscious awareness we feel inferior in relation to X and want

something he or she has. But envy is not a feeling that we are ever comfortable with, and so often we translate it as something more palatable—anger, dislike, resentment. Or let us say one day we are feeling a mood of frustration and impatience; person Y crosses our path at the wrong moment and we lash out, unaware that this anger is prompted by a different mood and out of proportion to Y's actions. Or let us say that we are truly angry at person Z. But the anger is sitting inside of us, caused by someone in our past who hurt us deeply, perhaps a parent. We direct the anger at Z because they remind us of this other person.

In other words, we do not have conscious access to the origins of our emotions and the moods they generate. Once we feel them, all we can do is try to interpret the emotion, translate it into language. But more often than not we get this wrong. We latch onto interpretations that are simple and that suit us. Or we remain baffled. We don't know why we feel depressed, for example. This unconscious aspect of emotions also means that it is very hard for us to learn from them, to stop or prevent compulsive behavior. Children who felt abandoned by their parents will tend to create patterns of abandonment in later life, without seeing the reason. (See *Trigger Points from Early Childhood*, on this page.)

The communicating function of emotions, a critical factor for social animals, also becomes somewhat tricky for us. We communicate anger when it is something else we are feeling, or about someone else, but the other person cannot see this and so they react as if personally attacked, which can create cascading misinterpretations.

Emotions evolved for a different reason than cognition. These two forms of relating to the world are not connected seamlessly in our brains. For animals, unburdened by the need to translate physical sensations into abstract language, emotions function smoothly, as they were meant to. For us, the split between our emotions and our cognition is a source of constant internal friction, comprising a second Emotional Self within us that operates beyond our will. Animals feel fear for a brief time, then it is gone. We dwell on our fears, intensifying them and making them last well past the moment of danger, even to the point of feeling constant anxiety.

Many might be tempted to imagine that we have somehow tamed this Emotional Self through all of our intellectual and technological

progress. After all, we don't appear as violent or passionate or superstitious as our ancestors; but this is an illusion. Progress and technology have not rewired us; they have merely altered the forms of our emotions and the type of irrationality that comes with them. For instance, new forms of media have enhanced the age-old ability of politicians and others to play on our emotions, in ever subtler and more sophisticated ways. Advertisers bombard us with highly effective subliminal messages. Our continual connection to social media makes us prone to new forms of viral emotional effects. These are not media designed for calm reflection. With their constant presence, we have less and less mental space to step back and think. We are as besieged with emotions and needless drama as the Athenians in the Assembly, because human nature has not changed.

Clearly the words *rational* and *irrational* can be quite loaded. People are always labeling those who disagree with them "irrational." What we need is a simple definition that can be applied as a way of judging, as accurately as possible, the difference between the two. The following shall serve as our barometer: We constantly feel emotions, and they continually infect our thinking, making us veer toward thoughts that please us and soothe our egos. It is impossible to not have our inclinations and feelings somehow involved in what we think. Rational people are aware of this and through introspection and effort are able, to some extent, to subtract emotions from their thinking and counteract their effect. Irrational people have no such awareness. They rush into action without carefully considering the ramifications and consequences.

We can see the difference in the decisions and actions that people take and the results that ensue. Rational people demonstrate over time that they are able to finish a project, to realize their goals, to work effectively with a team, and to create something that lasts. Irrational people reveal in their lives negative patterns—mistakes that keep repeating, unnecessary conflicts that follow them wherever they go, dreams and projects that are never realized, anger and desires for change that are never translated into concrete action. They are emotional and reactive and unaware of this. Everyone is capable of irrational decisions, some of which are caused by circumstances beyond our control. And even the most emotional types can hit upon great ideas or succeed momentarily through boldness. So it is important to judge over time whether a person is rational or irrational.

Can they sustain success and hit upon several good strategies? Can they adjust and learn from failures?

We can also see the difference between a rational and irrational person in particular situations, when it comes to calculating long-term effects and seeing what truly matters. For instance: In a divorce proceeding with child custody issues, rational people will manage to let go of their bitterness and prejudice and reason what is in the best overall long-term interests of the child. Irrational people will become consumed with a power struggle against the spouse, will let resentments and desires for vengeance secretly guide their decisions. This will lead to a protracted battle and a damaged child.

When it comes to hiring an assistant or partner, rational people will use competence as their barometer—can this person do the job? An irrational person will easily fall under the spell of those who are charming, who know how to feed their insecurities, or who pose little challenge or threat, and will hire them without realizing the reasons. This will lead to mistakes and inefficiencies, for which the irrational person will blame others. When it comes to career decisions, rational people will look for positions that fit their long-term goals. Irrational types will decide based on how much money they can immediately make, what they feel they deserve in life (sometimes very little), how much they can slack off on the job, or how much attention the position might bring them. This will lead to career dead ends.

In all cases, the degree of awareness represents the difference. Rational people can readily admit their own irrational tendencies and the need to be vigilant. On the other hand, irrational people become highly emotional when challenged about the emotional roots of their decisions. They are incapable of introspection and learning. Their mistakes make them increasingly defensive.

It is important to understand that rationality is not some means of transcending emotion. Pericles himself valued bold and adventurous action. He *loved* the spirit of Athena and the inspiration she brought. He wanted Athenians to feel love for their city and empathy for their fellow citizens. What he envisioned was a state of balance—a clear understanding of why we feel the way we do, conscious of our impulses so that we can think without being secretly compelled by our emotions. Pericles wanted the energy that comes from impulses and emotions to serve our thinking self. That was his vision of rationality, and our ideal.

Fortunately, to acquire rationality is not complicated. It simply requires knowing and working through a three-step process. First, we must become aware of what we shall call *low-grade irrationality*. This is a function of the continual moods and feelings that we experience in life, below the level of consciousness. When we plan or make decisions, we are not aware of how deeply these moods and feelings skew the thinking process. They create in our thinking pronounced biases that are so deeply ingrained in us that we see evidence of them in all cultures and all periods of history. These biases, by distorting reality, lead to the mistakes and ineffective decisions that plague our lives. Being aware of them, we can begin to counterbalance their effects.

Second, we must understand the nature of what we shall call *high-grade irrationality*. This occurs when our emotions become inflamed, generally because of certain pressures. As we think about our anger, excitement, resentment, or suspicion, it intensifies into a reactive state—everything we see or hear is interpreted through the lens of this emotion. We become more sensitive and more prone to other emotional reactions. Impatience and resentment can bleed into anger and deep distrust. These reactive states are what lead people to violence, to manic obsessions, to uncontrollable greed, or to desires to control another person. This form of irrationality is the source of more acute problems—crises, conflicts, and disastrous decisions. Understanding how this type of irrationality operates can allow us to recognize the reactive state as it is happening and pull back before we do something we regret.

Third, we need to enact certain strategies and exercises that will strengthen the thinking part of the brain and give it more power in the eternal struggle with our emotions.

The following three steps will help you begin on the path toward rationality. It would be wise to incorporate all three into your study and practice in human nature.

Step One: Recognize the Biases

Emotions are continually affecting our thought processes and decisions, below the level of our awareness. And the most common emotion of them all is the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Our thoughts almost inevitably revolve around this desire; we

simply recoil from entertaining ideas that are unpleasant or painful to us. We imagine we are looking for the truth, or being realistic, when in fact we are holding on to ideas that bring a release from tension and soothe our egos, make us feel superior. This *pleasure principle in thinking* is the source of all of our mental biases. If you believe that you are somehow immune to any of the following biases, it is simply an example of the pleasure principle in action. Instead, it is best to search and see how they continually operate inside you, as well as learn how to identify such irrationality in others.

Confirmation Bias

I look at the evidence and arrive at my decisions through more or less rational processes.

To hold an idea and convince ourselves we arrived at it rationally, we go in search of evidence to support our view. What could be more objective or scientific? But because of the pleasure principle and its unconscious influence, we manage to find the evidence that confirms what we *want* to believe. This is known as *confirmation bias*.

We can see this at work in people's plans, particularly those with high stakes. A plan is designed to lead to a positive, desired objective. If people considered the possible negative and positive consequences equally, they might find it hard to take any action. Inevitably they veer toward information that confirms the desired positive result, the rosy scenario, without realizing it. We also see this at work when people are supposedly asking for advice. This is the bane of most consultants. In the end, people want to hear their own ideas and preferences confirmed by an expert opinion. They will interpret what you say in light of what they want to hear; and if your advice runs counter to their desires, they will find some way to dismiss your opinion, your so-called expertise. The more powerful the person, the more they are subject to this form of the confirmation bias.

When investigating confirmation bias in the world, take a look at theories that seem a little too good to be true. Statistics and studies are trotted out to prove them; these are not very difficult to find, once you are convinced of the rightness of your argument. On the internet, it is easy to find studies that support both sides of an argument. In general, you should never accept the validity of people's ideas because they have supplied "evidence." Instead, examine the evidence yourself in

the cold light of day, with as much skepticism as you can muster. Your first impulse should always be to find the evidence that disconfirms your most cherished beliefs and those of others. That is true science.

Conviction Bias

I believe in this idea so strongly. It must be true.

We hold on to an idea that is secretly pleasing to us, but deep inside we might have some doubts as to its truth, and so we go an extra mile to convince ourselves—to believe in it with great vehemence and to loudly contradict anyone who challenges us. How can our idea not be true if it brings out in us such energy to defend it, we tell ourselves? This bias is revealed even more clearly in our relationship to leaders—if they express an opinion with heated words and gestures, colorful metaphors and entertaining anecdotes, and a deep well of conviction, it must mean they have examined the idea carefully to express it with such certainty. Those, on the other hand, who express nuances, whose tone is more hesitant, reveal weakness and self-doubt. They are probably lying, or so we think. This bias makes us susceptible to salesmen and demagogues who display conviction as a way to convince and deceive. They know that people are hungry for entertainment, so they cloak their half-truths with dramatic effects.

Appearance Bias

I understand the people I deal with; I see them just as they are.

We see people not as they are, but as they appear to us. And these appearances are usually misleading. First, people have trained themselves in social situations to present the front that is appropriate and that will be judged positively. They seem to be in favor of the noblest causes, always presenting themselves as hardworking and conscientious. We take these masks for reality. Second, we are prone to fall for the *halo effect*—when we see certain negative or positive qualities in a person (social awkwardness, intelligence), other positive or negative qualities are implied that fit with this. People who are good-looking generally seem more trustworthy, particularly politicians. If a person is successful, we imagine they are probably also ethical, conscientious, and deserving of their good fortune. This obscures the fact that many people who have gotten ahead have done

so through less-than-moral actions, which they cleverly disguise from view.

The Group Bias

My ideas are my own. I do not listen to the group. I am not a conformist.

We are social animals by nature. The feeling of isolation, of difference from the group, is depressing and terrifying. We experience tremendous relief when we find others who think the same way we do. In fact, we are motivated to take up ideas and opinions *because* they bring us this relief. We are unaware of this pull and so imagine we have come to certain ideas completely on our own. Look at people who support one party or the other, one ideology—a noticeable orthodoxy or correctness prevails, without anyone saying anything or applying overt pressure. If someone is on the right or the left, their opinions will almost always follow the same direction on dozens of issues, as if by magic, and yet few would ever admit this influence on their thought patterns.

The Blame Bias

I learn from my experience and mistakes.

Mistakes and failures elicit the need to explain. We want to learn the lesson and not repeat the experience. But in truth, we do not like to look too closely at what we did; our introspection is limited. Our natural response is to blame others, circumstances, or a momentary lapse of judgment. The reason for this bias is that it is often too painful to look at our mistakes. It calls into question our feelings of superiority. It pokes at our ego. We go through the motions, pretending to reflect on what we did. But with the passage of time, the pleasure principle rises and we forget what small part in the mistake we ascribed to ourselves. Desire and emotion will blind us yet again, and we will repeat exactly the same mistake and go through the same mild recriminating process, followed by forgetfulness, until we die. If people truly learned from their experience, we would find few mistakes in the world and career paths that ascend ever upward.

Superiority Bias

I'm different. I'm more rational than others, more ethical as well.

Few would say this to people in conversation. It sounds arrogant. But in numerous opinion polls and studies, when asked to compare themselves with others, people generally express a variation of this. It's the equivalent of an optical illusion—we cannot seem to see our faults and irrationalities, only those of others. So, for instance, we'll easily believe that those in the other political party do not come to their opinions based on rational principles, but those on our side have done so. On the ethical front, few of us will ever admit that we have resorted to deception or manipulation in our work or have been clever and strategic in our career advancement. Everything we've got, or so we think, comes from natural talent and hard work. But with other people, we are quick to ascribe to them all kinds of Machiavellian tactics. This allows us to justify whatever we do, no matter the results.

We feel a tremendous pull to imagine ourselves as rational, decent, and ethical. These are qualities highly promoted in the culture. To show signs otherwise is to risk great disapproval. If all of this were true—if people were rational and morally superior—the world would be suffused with goodness and peace. We know, however, the reality, and so some people, perhaps all of us, are merely deceiving ourselves. Rationality and ethical qualities must be achieved through awareness and effort. They do not come naturally. They come through a maturation process.

Step Two: Beware the Inflaming Factors

Low-grade emotions continually affect our thinking, and they originate from our own impulses—for instance, the desire for pleasing and comforting thoughts. High-grade emotion, however, comes at certain moments, reaches an explosive pitch, and is generally sparked by something external—a person who gets under our skin, or particular circumstances. The level of arousal is higher and our attention is captured completely. The more we think about the emotion, the stronger it gets, which makes us focus even more on it, and so on and so forth. Our minds tunnel into the emotion, and everything reminds us of our anger or excitement. We become reactive. Because we are unable to bear the tension this brings, high-grade emotion usually culminates in some rash action with disastrous consequences. In the

middle of such an attack we feel possessed, as if a second, limbic self has taken over.

It is best to be aware of these factors so that you can stop the mind from tunneling and prevent the releasing action that you will always come to regret. You should also be aware of high-grade irrationality in others, to either get out of their way or help bring them back to reality.

Trigger Points from Early Childhood

In early childhood we were at our most sensitive and vulnerable. Our relationship to our parents had a much greater impact on us the further back in time we go. The same could be said for any early powerful experience. These vulnerabilities and wounds remain buried deep within our minds. Sometimes we try to repress the memory of these influences, if they happen to be negative—great fears or humiliations. Sometimes, however, they are associated with positive emotions, experiences of love and attention that we continually want to relive. Later in life, a person or event will trigger a memory of this positive or negative experience, and with it a release of powerful chemicals or hormones associated with the memory.

Take, for example, a young man who had a distant, narcissistic mother. As an infant or child, he experienced her coldness as abandonment, and to be abandoned must mean he was somehow unworthy of her love. Or similarly, a new sibling on the scene caused his mother to give him much less attention, which he equally experienced as abandonment. Later in life, in a relationship, a woman might hint at disapproval of some trait or action of his, all of which is part of a healthy relationship. This will hit a trigger point—she is noticing his flaws, which, he imagines, precedes her abandonment of him. He feels a powerful rush of emotion, a sense of imminent betrayal. He does not see the source of this; it is beyond his control. He overreacts, accuses, withdraws, all of which leads to the very thing he feared—abandonment. His reaction was to some reflection in his mind, not to the reality. This is the height of irrationality.

The way to recognize this in yourself and in others is by noticing behavior that is suddenly childish in its intensity and seemingly out of character. This could center on any key emotion. It could be fear—of losing control, of failure. In this case, we react by withdrawing from the situation and the presence of others, like a child curling up into a

ball. A sudden illness, brought on by the intense fear, will conveniently cause us to have to leave the scene. It could be love—desperately searching to re-create a close parental or sibling relationship in the present, triggered by someone who vaguely reminds us of the lost paradise. It could be extreme mistrust, originating from an authority figure in early childhood who disappointed or betrayed us, generally the father. This often triggers a sudden rebellious attitude.

The great danger here is that in misreading the present and reacting to something in the past, we create conflict, disappointments, and mistrust that only strengthen the wound. In some ways, we are programmed to repeat the early experience in the present. Our only defense is awareness as it is happening. We can recognize a trigger point by the experience of emotions that are unusually primal, more uncontrollable than normal. They trigger tears, deep depression, or excessive hope. People under the spell of these emotions will often have a very different tone of voice and body language, as if they were physically reliving a moment from early life.

In the midst of such an attack, we must struggle to detach ourselves and contemplate the possible source—the wound in early childhood—and the patterns it has locked us into. This deep understanding of ourselves and our vulnerabilities is a key step toward becoming rational.

Sudden Gains or Losses

Sudden success or winnings can be very dangerous. Neurologically, chemicals are released in the brain that give a powerful jolt of arousal and energy, leading to the desire to repeat this experience. It can be the start of any kind of addiction and manic behavior. Also, when gains come quickly we tend to lose sight of the basic wisdom that true success, to really last, must come through hard work. We do not take into account the role that luck plays in such sudden gains. We try again and again to recapture that high from winning so much money or attention. We acquire feelings of grandiosity. We become especially resistant to anyone who tries to warn us—they don't understand, we tell ourselves. Because this cannot be sustained, we experience an inevitable fall, which is all the more painful, leading to the depression part of the cycle. Although gamblers are the most prone to this, it equally applies to businesspeople during bubbles and to people who gain sudden attention from the public.

Unexpected losses or a string of losses equally create irrational reactions. We imagine we are cursed with bad luck and that this will go on indefinitely. We become fearful and hesitant, which will often lead to more mistakes or failures. In sports, this can induce what is known as choking, as previous losses and misses weigh on the mind and tighten it up.

The solution here is simple: whenever you experience unusual gains or losses, that is precisely the time to step back and counterbalance them with some necessary pessimism or optimism. Be extra wary of sudden success and attention—they are not built on anything that lasts and they have an addictive pull. And the fall is always painful.

Rising Pressure

The people around you generally appear sane and in control of their lives. But put any of them in stressful circumstances, with the pressure rising, and you will see a different reality. The cool mask of self-control comes off. They suddenly lash out in anger, reveal a paranoid streak, and become hypersensitive and often petty. Under stress or any threat, the most primitive parts of the brain are aroused and engaged, overwhelming people's reasoning powers. In fact, stress or tension can reveal flaws in people that they have carefully concealed from view. It is often wise to observe people in such moments, precisely as a way to judge their true character.

Whenever you notice rising pressure and stress levels in your life, you must watch yourself carefully. Monitor any signs of unusual brittleness or sensitivity, sudden suspicions, fears disproportionate to the circumstances. Observe with as much detachment as possible, finding time and space to be alone. You need perspective. Never imagine that you are someone who can withstand rising stress without emotional leakage. It is not possible. But through self-awareness and reflection you can prevent yourself from making decisions you will come to regret.

Inflaming Individuals

There are people in the world who by their nature tend to trigger powerful emotions in almost everyone they encounter. These emotions range among the extremes of love, hatred, confidence, and mistrust. Some examples in history would include King David in the Bible,

Alcibiades in ancient Athens, Julius Caesar in ancient Rome, Georges Danton during the French Revolution, and Bill Clinton. These types have a degree of charisma—they have the ability to express eloquently emotions they are feeling, which inevitably stirs parallel emotions in others. But some of them can also be quite narcissistic; they project their internal drama and troubles outward, catching other people up in the turmoil they create. This leads to profound feelings of attraction in some and repulsion in others.

It is best to recognize these inflamers by how they affect others, not just yourself. No one can remain indifferent to them. People find themselves incapable of reasoning or maintaining any distance in their presence. They make you think of them continually when not in their presence. They have an obsessive quality, and they can lead you to extreme actions as a devoted follower or as an inveterate enemy. On either end of the spectrum—attraction or repulsion—you will tend to be irrational and you will desperately need to distance yourself. A good strategy to utilize is to see through the front they project. They inevitably try to cast a larger-than-life image, a mythic, intimidating quality; but in fact they are all too human, full of the same insecurities and weaknesses we all possess. Try to recognize these very human traits and demythologize them.

The Group Effect

This is the high-grade variety of the *group bias*. When we are in a group of a large enough size, we become different. Notice yourself and others at a sporting event, a concert, a religious or political gathering. It is impossible to not feel yourself caught up in the collective emotions. Your heart beats faster. Tears of joy or sadness come more readily. Being in a group does not stimulate independent reasoning but rather the intense desire to belong. This can happen equally in a work environment, particularly if the leader plays on people's emotions to spur competitive, aggressive desires, or creates an us-versus-them dynamic. The group effect does not necessarily require the presence of others. It can occur virally, as some opinion spreads over social media and infects us with the desire to share the opinion—generally of a strong variety, such as outrage.

There is an exhilarating, positive aspect to the stimulation of group emotions. It is how we can be rallied to do something for the collective good. But if you notice the appeal is to more diabolical emotions, such

as hatred of the other, rabid patriotism, aggression, or sweeping worldviews, you need to inoculate yourself and see through the powerful pull as it works on you. It is often best to avoid the group setting if possible in order to maintain your reasoning powers, or to enter such moments with maximum skepticism.

Be aware of demagogues who exploit the group effect and stimulate outbreaks of irrationality. They inevitably resort to certain devices. In a group setting, they begin by warming up the crowd, talking about ideas and values that everyone shares, creating a pleasant feeling of agreement. They rely on vague but loaded words full of emotive quality such as *justice* or *truth* or *patriotism*. They talk of abstract, noble goals rather than the solving of specific problems with concrete action.

Demagogues in politics or the media try to stir a continual sense of panic, urgency, and outrage. They must keep the emotional levels high. Your defense is simple: Consider your reasoning powers, your ability to think for yourself, your most precious possession. Resent any kind of intrusion upon your independent mind by others. When you feel you are in the presence of a demagogue, become doubly wary and analytical.

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A final word on the irrational in human nature: do not imagine that the more extreme types of irrationality have somehow been overcome through progress and enlightenment. Throughout history we witness continual cycles of rising and falling levels of the irrational. The great golden age of Pericles, with its philosophers and its first stirrings of the scientific spirit, was followed by an age of superstition, cults, and intolerance. This same phenomenon happened after the Italian Renaissance. That this cycle is bound to recur again and again is part of human nature.

The irrational simply changes its look and its fashions. We may no longer have literal witch hunts, but in the twentieth century, not so very long ago, we witnessed the show trials of Stalin, the McCarthy hearings in the U.S. Senate, and the mass persecutions during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Various cults are continually being generated, including cults of personality and the fetishizing of celebrities. Technology now inspires religious fervor. People have a

desperate need to believe in something and they will find it anywhere. Polls have revealed that increasing numbers of people believe in ghosts, spirits, and angels, in the twenty-first century.

As long as there are humans, the irrational will find its voices and means of spreading. Rationality is something to be acquired by individuals, not by mass movements or technological progress. Feeling superior and beyond it is a sure sign that the irrational is at work.

Step Three: Strategies Toward Bringing Out the Rational Self

Despite our pronounced irrational tendencies, two factors should give us all hope. First and foremost is the existence throughout history and in all cultures of people of high rationality, the types who have made progress possible. They serve as ideals for all of us to aim for. These include Pericles, the ruler Aśoka of ancient India, Marcus Aurelius of ancient Rome, Marguerite de Valois in medieval France, Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, the writer Anton Chekhov, the anthropologist Margaret Mead, and the businessman Warren Buffett, to name but a few. All of these types share certain qualities—a realistic appraisal of themselves and their weaknesses; a devotion to truth and reality; a tolerant attitude toward people; and the ability to reach goals that they have set.

The second factor is that almost all of us at some point in our lives have experienced moments of greater rationality. This often comes with what we shall call the *maker's mind-set*. We have a project to get done, perhaps with a deadline. The only emotion we can afford is excitement and energy. Other emotions simply make it impossible to concentrate. Because we have to get results, we become exceptionally practical. We focus on the work—our mind calm, our ego not intruding. If people try to interrupt or infect us with emotions, we resent it. These moments—as fleeting as a few weeks or hours—reveal the rational self that is waiting to come out. It just requires some awareness and some practice.

The following strategies are designed to help you bring out that inner Pericles or Athena:

Know yourself thoroughly. The Emotional Self thrives on ignorance. The moment you are aware of how it operates and

dominates you is the moment it loses its hold on you and can be tamed. Therefore, your first step toward the rational is always inward. You want to catch that Emotional Self in action. For this purpose, you must reflect on how you operate under stress. What particular weaknesses come out in such moments—the desire to please, to bully or control, deep levels of mistrust? Look at your decisions, especially those that have been ineffective—can you see a pattern, an underlying insecurity that impels them? Examine your strengths, what makes you different from other people. This will help you decide upon goals that mesh with your long-term interests and that are aligned with your skills. By knowing and valuing what marks you as different, you will also be able to resist the pull of the group bias and effect.

Examine your emotions to their roots. You are angry. Let the feeling settle from within, and think about it. Was it triggered by something seemingly trivial or petty? That is a sure sign that something or someone else is behind it. Perhaps a more uncomfortable emotion is at the source—such as envy or paranoia. You need to look at this square in the eye. Dig below any trigger points to see where they started. For these purposes, it might be wise to use a journal in which you record your self-assessments with ruthless objectivity. Your greatest danger here is your ego and how it makes you unconsciously maintain illusions about yourself. These may be comforting in the moment, but in the long run they make you defensive and unable to learn or progress. Find a neutral position from which you can observe your actions, with a bit of detachment and even humor. Soon all of this will become second nature, and when the Emotional Self suddenly rears its head in some situation, you will see it as it happens and be able to step back and find that neutral position.

Increase your reaction time. This power comes through practice and repetition. When some event or interaction requires a response, you must train yourself to step back. This could mean physically removing yourself to a place where you can be alone and not feel any pressure to respond. Or it could mean writing that angry email but not sending it. You sleep on it for a day or two. You do not make phone calls or communicate while feeling some sudden emotion, particularly resentment. If you find yourself rushing to commit to people, to hire or be hired by them, step back and give it a day. Cool the emotions down. The longer you can take the better, because perspective comes with time. Consider this like resistance training—

the longer you can resist reacting, the more mental space you have for actual reflection, and the stronger your mind will become.

Accept people as facts. Interactions with people are the major source of emotional turmoil, but it doesn't have to be that way. The problem is that we are continually judging people, wishing they were something that they are not. We want to change them. We want them to think and act a certain way, most often the way we think and act. And because this is not possible, because everyone is different, we are continually frustrated and upset. Instead, see other people as phenomena, as neutral as comets or plants. They simply exist. They come in all varieties, making life rich and interesting. Work with what they give you, instead of resisting and trying to change them. Make understanding people a fun game, the solving of puzzles. It is all part of the human comedy. Yes, people are irrational, but so are you. Make your acceptance of human nature as radical as possible. This will calm you down and help you observe people more dispassionately, understanding them on a deeper level. You will stop projecting your own emotions on to them. All of this will give you more balance and calmness, more mental space for thinking.

It is certainly difficult to do this with the nightmare types who cross our path—the raging narcissists, the passive aggressors, and other inflamers. They remain a continual test to our rationality. Look at the Russian writer Anton Chekhov, one of the most fiercely rational people who ever lived, as the model for this. His family was large and poor, and his father, an alcoholic, mercilessly beat all of the children, including young Chekhov. Chekhov became a doctor and took up writing as a side career. He applied his training as a doctor to the human animal, his goal to understand what makes us so irrational, so unhappy, and so dangerous. In his stories and plays, he found it immensely therapeutic to get inside his characters and make sense of even the worst types. In this way, he could forgive anybody, even his father. His approach in these cases was to imagine that each person, no matter how twisted, has a reason for what they've become, a logic that makes sense to them. In their own way, they are striving for fulfillment, but irrationally. By stepping back and imagining their story from the inside, Chekhov demythologized the brutes and aggressors; he cut them down to human size. They no longer elicited hatred but rather pity. You must think more like a writer in approaching the people you deal with, even the worst sorts.

Find the optimal balance of thinking and emotion. We cannot divorce emotions from thinking. The two are completely intertwined. But there is inevitably a dominant factor, some people more clearly governed by emotions than others. What we are looking for is the proper ratio and balance, the one that leads to the most effective action. The ancient Greeks had an appropriate metaphor for this: the rider and the horse.

The horse is our emotional nature continually impelling us to move. This horse has tremendous energy and power, but without a rider it cannot be guided; it is wild, subject to predators, and continually heading into trouble. The rider is our thinking self. Through training and practice, it holds the reins and guides the horse, transforming this powerful animal energy into something productive. The one without the other is useless. Without the rider, no directed movement or purpose. Without the horse, no energy, no power. In most people the horse dominates, and the rider is weak. In some people the rider is too strong, holds the reins too tightly, and is afraid to occasionally let the animal go into a gallop. The horse and rider must work together. This means we consider our actions beforehand; we bring as much thinking as possible to a situation before we make a decision. But once we decide what to do, we loosen the reins and enter action with boldness and a spirit of adventure. Instead of being slaves to this energy, we channel it. That is the essence of rationality.

As an example of this ideal in action, try to maintain a perfect balance between skepticism (rider) and curiosity (horse). In this mode you are skeptical about your own enthusiasms and those of others. You do not accept at face value people's explanations and their application of "evidence." You look at the results of their actions, not what they say about their motivations. But if you take this too far, your mind will close itself off from wild ideas, from exciting speculations, from curiosity itself. You want to retain the elasticity of spirit you had as a child, interested in everything, while retaining the hard-nosed need to verify and scrutinize for yourself all ideas and beliefs. The two can coexist. It is a balance that all geniuses possess.

Love the rational. It is important to not see the path to rationality as something painful and ascetic. In fact, it brings powers that are immensely satisfying and pleasurable, much deeper than the more manic pleasures the world tends to offer us. You have felt this in your own life when absorbed in a project, time flowing by, and

experiencing occasional bursts of excitement as you make discoveries or progress in your work. There are other pleasures as well. Being able to tame the Emotional Self leads to an overall calmness and clarity. In this state of mind you are less consumed by petty conflicts and considerations. Your actions are more effective, which also leads to less turmoil. You have the immense satisfaction of mastering yourself in a deep way. You have more mental space to be creative. You feel more in control.

Knowing all of this, it will become easier to motivate yourself to develop this power. In this sense, you are following the path of Pericles himself. He envisioned the goddess Athena embodying all of the practical powers of rationality. He worshipped and loved this goddess above all others. We may no longer venerate the goddess as a deity, but we can appreciate on a deep level all of those who promote rationality in our own world, and we can seek to internalize their power as much as we can.

> "Trust your feelings!"—But feelings are nothing final or original; behind feelings there stand judgments and evaluations which we inherit in the form of . . . inclinations, aversions. . . . The inspiration born of a feeling is the grandchild of a judgment—and often of a false judgment!—and in any event not a child of your own! To trust one's feelings—means to give more obedience to one's grandfather and grandmother and their grandparents than to the gods which are in us: our reason and our experience.
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> —*Friedrich Nietzsche*