

Beyond rationality?

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

Love is not rational. As early as the 14th century, Jean Buridan (1300-1358) proved that a perfectly rational donkey placed right between two haystacks would starve. After all, it couldn't rationally decide which of the two haystacks to approach to eat. Likewise, a rational choice of partner would end in abandonment as soon as even a slightly 'better' partner appears. As a result, nothing could be built together, while collaboration is exactly what people are good at, for better or for worse. Virtues such as love and loyalty and feelings such as passion and jealousy play a much more important and evolutionarily entrenched role than rationality. When trying to understand our world in exceptional crisis situations, we have to keep this in mind. However, this turns out to be extremely complicated and, paradoxically, requires well-implemented rationality. What about that?

Take the current Corona crisis. When we first encountered it in March, we knew almost nothing. Granted, we knew we could infect and become infected, and practically everyone wanted to prevent that. We understood that we had to make sacrifices for this and in the beginning we were happy to do that. Hands and surfaces had to be cleaned continuously, so that we could not pass the virus by touch. Disinfectants and wipes became a symbol of good intentions, awareness and care and thus for the catering industry, shops, schools and work. A new reality emerged, the new normal.

Months have passed since then. Last week's online magazine *Wired* features a long article about what they describe as the "hygiene theatre". It states that in the early summer it was known that touching contaminated surfaces almost never leads to contamination, while breathing shared air became known as one of the main routes leading to contamination (Barber, 2020). So basically we need to switch from disinfection and social distance to face masks and ventilation. However, as the *Wired* paper describes, talking about aerosols has long been avoided because it is much more frightening and less easily translated into operational 'rational' behaviour. Like cigar smoke, infected mini-drops can linger in the room for up to an hour and infect those present, making it difficult to protect each other and ourselves. So the visible fight against the virus through social distance and disinfection has to be turned into something invisible, and that is much more frightening. Therefore, we cannot let go of the symbols of the first hour; no shaking hands and constantly disinfecting objects and hands became symbols to express our hospitality and concern for one another. That is not surprising at all.

Let's face it, the evolutionary aspects we have in common with other primates, such as greeting, kissing, and the exchange of pleasantries after a long separation, aren't based on rationality either. Last March, our Dutch government, like any other government, had to contain the effects of the new unknown virus with limited knowledge. In March they introduced the 'new normal': 'five-foot society', clean the surface of all used objects, do not shake hands and wash your hands over and over again. With the present knowledge, some of these measures are now part of the mentioned hygiene theatre. However, the value of symbols should not be underestimated. Throwing them away can be alienating and undermining, with unpredictable (disastrous) consequences. Science as rationality incarnate cannot help with this. So instead of condemning the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment or the government, it is more helpful to try to understand the power of symbols, feelings and virtues. Conversely, aerosol transmission – according to increasing scientific evidence, the main transmission of the Corona virus – should not be denied, purely to maintain our feeling of control. Control or no control, the left or right hay bale, as was the case with Buridan's donkey, rationality alone will not lead us to make a choice either.

Barber, G. (2020). It's Time to Talk About COVID-19 and Surfaces Again. *Wired*, 20 October 2020.