

***Beyond relativizm and ethnocentrizm***  
***The Significance of Communication Technologies***  
***for Investigations Regarding Rationality Introduction***

The aim of this article is to approach the question of the actual significance carried by the history of communication technology in the context of theories of rationality. To what extent can a historical perspective of the relations between culture and the advances in communication technologies prove valuable in the analysis of philosophical theories of rationality? Before attempting an answer, one should consider the particular specifics of the problems faced by theories of rationality as such.

Keith Devlin (Devlin, 1997) claims that we are now witnessing a significant change in the very way of thinking about rationality. In his opinion, a departure is currently underway from the Cartesian paradigm and toward contextual theories of rationality. The underlying reason behind this change of perspective is the need to consider the fact that even in the context of highly rationalised modern societies, there is still a significant incidence of actions and mindsets which contradict the rules of logic. Various attempts to account for the incidence of illogical thinking have given rise to contextual theories of rationality. The new paradigm of thinking about rationality takes into consideration the problems related to the evolutionary history of humankind and their significance in the context of decision-making in situations of uncertainty; it accounts for the role of emotion in rumination, as well as the psychological mechanisms of changing one's mind and the phenomenological perspective of everyday experience. K. Devlin's (1997, pp. 359-369) critique of the traditional concepts of rationality draws mainly on sciences such as cognitive psychology, biology, neurophysiology, cognitivism, and artificial intelligence theories, all of which treat rationality as a quality typifying the conduct of individual

subjects. It seems, however, that the social dimension of rationality is somewhat underrepresented in this depiction, principally in terms of the socio-cultural diversity of patterns of rational behaviour. The cultural anthropology perspective in particular is closely related to the issues of rationality. The source of anthropological reflection is the feeling of surprise when observing how varied thinking and conduct can be, whereas its goal is to understand the relations between the rationality of the western world and the rationality, or lack thereof, observed in other cultures.

Current deliberations tend to follow the line of argumentation first signalled by Ernst Cassirer (1951), who criticised the classic approach to rationality and observed that defining a human being as the «animal rationale» is no longer justified in the light of evidence provided by cultural anthropology. The variety of data generated by social sciences leads to a situation where the very conviction of the homogeneity of human nature is called into question. John Locke (1999) also emphasizes the need to assume the uniformity of rational human nature when he writes: *«But God has not been so sparing to men to make them barely two-legged creatures, and left it to Aristotle to make them rational»* (Locke, 1999, p. 666). As observed by Baumgartner (Baumgartner, 1996), understanding the relations between the primitive Man's way of thinking and our modern rationality, as well as proper substantiation of the homogeneity of human nature, remain unresolved challenges faced by philosophical theories of rationality. In particular, one should ask whether said theories are even capable of explaining the continuity of thought between traditional societies and modern rationality. Will theories of rationality be able to account for the homogeneity of human nature without blurring the significant differences observed between particular cultures and ways of thinking?

Faced with the above dilemma, theories of rationality are likely to adopt one of two most common stances. When giving a positive answer to the question of whether primitive and modern societies display a certain mindset continuity, theories often tend to veer towards extreme relativism. They will offer a weak definition of rationality, which allows reason to be attributed to any and all human beings. However, a weak

definition of rationality is unable to account for various significant differences in reasoning observed between people of diverse cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, one can also encounter theories which, often indirectly, stipulate a negative answer to that very question. They will quote a strong definition of rationality, but in doing so fall into the trap of ethnocentrism, which results in excluding certain societies from the rational community (Goody, 1977). Before proceeding with detailed discussion concerning difficulties faced by each approach, key models of rationality that have emerged in the history of philosophy need to be presented. This will not only impose a certain order of argumentation, but also substantiate the thesis that a vast majority of modern theories of rationality struggle with the answer to the question of the alleged continuity between traditional and modern societies.

### **Models of rationality theories**

From the historical perspective, a number of breakthroughs could be singled out, whose influence has significantly transformed our understanding of rationality as such. Given the aims of this article, the following seem the most noteworthy: the emergence of the concept of subjective rationality, and consequently: of discursive, critical and instrumental rationality. It may be worthwhile to recount the way in which H. Schänadelbach (1995) analyses the conceptual sources of each of these concepts of rationality.

In the antiquity, rationality was understood objectivistically as a quality of the surrounding world, to which a subjective mind need only attune itself. The concept of subjective rationality did not emerge until it was prompted by two medieval disputes: the dispute between voluntarism and intellectualism concerning divine omnipotence, and the debate on universals between realists and nominalists. In the former, voluntarism eventually gained the upper hand, which led to the widespread belief that the world was a manifestation of God's will, rather than God's reason. Meanwhile, the prevalence of nominalism in the philosophy of late Middle Ages resulted in the conviction that the objects of general concepts do not exist objectively, and consequently neither do divine sources of knowledge. In the aftermath of these transformations, the

belief in the rational order of the world had to be abandoned. Rationality was thus reserved exclusively to a thinking subject. Ever since, it has been understood as a quality of action or thought or a predisposition for a certain type of behaviour (Baumgartner, 1996; Schnädelbach, 1995, 2001). The following analyses will pertain to this particular, subjectivist understanding of rationality.

Another significant conceptual change relates to the emergence of the concept of discursive rationality. Plato distinguished two complementary aspects of human conduct: ratio (reason) and nous (intellect). Reason is the ability to think discursively, use representations, command methodically. Intellect is understood as the capacity for intuitive formulation of ideas independently of the senses. Schnädelbach (1995) argues that such duality of rationality could still be traced as late as in the works of Descartes. With the development of empiricism, the concept of discursive rationality emerges. Rationality is reduced to operations on representations. A human being is defined as an entity engaged in various information processing endeavours. A particular form of this discursive depiction is the concept of procedural rationality understood as behaviour compatible with clearly specified, rather than random, rules. A model of such procedural rationality was proposed as early as in the works of Thomas Hobbes (1699), who defines rationality as behaviour, i.e. as transformation of representations with regard to the laws of mathematics. According to Schnädelbach (1995) the procedural concept of rationality is a model for the concepts of rationality emerging in European philosophy since the 17<sup>th</sup> c.

Within the general category of discursive rationality, further attempts have been made to scrutinize the notion. Particularly noteworthy among these are the concepts of critical rationality and instrumental rationality. A classic example of rationality understood in terms of criticism is found in Immanuel Kant. As observed by Schnädelbach, this depiction identifies the core aspect of rationality in not so much calculation or adherence to rules, but rather in critical reflection aimed at the results of intellectual activity. Rationality means self-awareness and self-criticism. Said criticism denotes, firstly, a certain systematisation and arrangement of knowledge, and secondly, distancing oneself from one's own beliefs in

an attempt to avert the danger of obsessiveness and dogmatism. Another category of rationality theories originated from Max Weber's notion of instrumental rationality. This type of rationality is rooted in protestant ethics. Moreover, Schnädelbach suggests that the ideal of instrumental rationality could only come to full fruition with the decline of Aristotelian concept of the objective purpose of life. Ever since, as a result of this change, the theory of rationality has been unable to comment on rational objectives in life, it has only had the capacity to offer guidelines in terms of the preferable paths leading to the achievement of arbitrarily selected goals. Instrumental rationality can therefore be defined as the ability to choose the adequate means to facilitate certain arbitrarily selected goals in accordance with the actor's currently possessed knowledge and the available alternative courses of action.

The below considerations will base upon the three aforementioned models of the theory of rationality, namely: discursive, critical and instrumental rationality. It seems that within each of the models discussed, certain tendencies can be observed towards ethnocentric absolutisations of cultural differences as well as towards relativistic blurring of cultural distinctions.

### **Theories of rationality and their problems**

A paradigmatic example of a concept of rationality which puts a particular emphasis on cultural differences is Cartesian philosophy with its definition of rationality perceived in terms of self-awareness and compliance with the principles of the analytical method. Theories of this type are aimed at formulating a universal ideal of rationality to which everyone ought to adhere if one wishes to be perceived as a rational being. When pushed to the extreme the rational-irrational opposition this particular stance leads to the conclusion that a truly rational subject will act in accordance with the standards of logic. On the basis of the Cartesian criteria, members of primitive cultures could not be characterised as rational. Consequently, the theory advocates the claim that true rationality is indeed a quality of the Western culture, while representatives of primitive cultures are inherently irrational. It is only by rejecting primitive beliefs and practices that people in

traditional cultures can fully become what is believed to be human beings. Rationality is perceived here as an intrinsic quality of a given culture. Leaving the matter-of- theory validity aside, its particular weakness lies in its indifference towards the historical dimension. The theory is incapable of explaining how the shift from irrational, primitive cultures to the rational mindset of the modern Man was at all possible. In other words, if we assume that the rational thought is alien to primitive societies, a question immediately leaps to mind: how could rationalism-infused European culture ever have emerged from cultural formations dominated by irrationalism? The main weakness of the Cartesian theory of rationality is manifested by the very inability to answer this question. The consequence of that weakness is the often tacit acceptance of the thesis that *«it is due to the genius of the Greeks or the Western Europeans, that modern Man emerged»* (Goody, 1977, p. 16). As a result, Europeans are attributed a certain innate competence to establish rational patterns of conduct, whereas the primitive man, deprived of this Western genius, is at best capable of imitating the same. This conclusion is tantamount with accepting the thesis of a fundamental discontinuity relative to the way of thinking present in primitive cultures and that of the Western World (Goody & Watt, 1963; Goody, 1977).

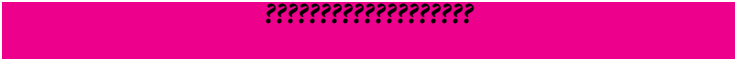
In light of the above, therefore, two types of errors can be identified in the scope of classic theories of rationality. Firstly, reflection is limited to the characteristics of the Western ideal of rationality, while the various mindsets present in other cultures are ignored (Gellner, 1987). The second, less apparent error can be attributed to theories which, while recognising the differences in terms of modern and primitive thinking, are nonetheless unable to account for the qualities that bring these two distinct mindsets together. The opinion that rationality is an inner and inherent quality of European culture is unsatisfactory for reasons beyond the mere negation of the unity of human nature. An advocate of this approach, when questioned about the actual reasons for which a given style of thought is perceived as rational, will have to answer that it is an intrinsic quality of a given culture. According to Goody (1977) thus constructed answer is burdened with the error of circular thinking. Under this argumentation, the reason for the emergence of

modern rationality is a certain innate quality of modern culture, namely: rationality. To apply terminology coined by Goody (1977, pp. 36–51) theories of this type can be termed as dualist theories or theories of the «Great Divide».

An alternative to the above is offered by the relativist approach. As opposed to classic theories of rationality, the point of reference in the relativist model is the recognition of certain significant intercultural differences, while its aim is to construct a theory of rationality which will, despite said differences, be able to indicate mechanisms of rational thought and action common to all members of the human race. A good example of the relativist approach is a theory relying on cybernetics to explain the basis of rational conduct common to all human beings. Portrayed as such, the stance is reduced to the activity of introducing order into a reality of variety and chaos, while the yardstick by which rationality is measured is the extent to which actions and environments are ordered (Cackowski, 1997). This weak definition of rationality allows mankind to be perceived as a whole. This fact constitutes an undeniable advantage of the relativist approach over the theory of the «Great Divide». Its weakness, however, lies in its inability to effectively account for the palpable qualitative discrepancy in terms of Western rationality and the way of thinking attributable to primitive cultures. The differences of action and thought observed between representatives of particular cultures is perceived as quantitative rather than qualitative. It is assumed that culturally conditioned mindsets can be boiled down to a common determinant expressed by their particular efficiency in the process of ordering the environment. Ernst Gellner (1987) argues that relativist theories tacitly assume that an average representative of a primitive culture will think in a way comparable to that of an average European's.

At this point, it is time to have a somewhat closer look at the abovementioned models of rationality (critical, instrumental and procedural) as well as the obstacles they need to overcome (comp. Tab. 1). It seems that, without fear of exaggeration, the Cartesian and Kantian types of theories can be ascribed to the model of the «Great Divide». Both Kant and Descartes, when developing their notions of

rationality, failed to take the historical perspective into account and their characteristics rely on categories typical of the modern culture, i.e. self-awareness, critical thought, the idea of objectivity, thinking in line with particular principles, and relying on unambiguous and explicit concepts (Kondor, 2008). Consequently, the stance establishes a clear distinction between modern rationality and the primitive mindset.



DUALIST THEORIES(absolutisation of differences)	RELATIVIST THEORIES (blurring differences)
CRITICAL RATIONALITY Rationality as criticism: the sceptical attitude, self-aware and detached subject (I. Kant).	
PROCEDURAL RATIONALITY 1 Rationality as application of the rules of logics, the scientific method (Descartes, T. Hobbes)	PROCEDURAL RATIONALITY 2 Rationality as application of subjectively adopted rules applicable in a given context (K. Devlin)
INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY (formal) Rationality as a highly formalised reflection on unambiguously defined goals and the means of achieving them	INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY (material) Rationality as the aptitude for reasonable and relatively effective conduct, common to all Men

A particular situation can be observed in the context of procedural and instrumental rationality (comp. tab. 1). The model of procedural rationality, depending of on the adopted inclusive or narrow definition of the rules of conduct, falls under the category of, respectively, the relativist model or the model of the «Great Divide». For instance, an inclusive definition of the rules of conduct was adopted in the aforementioned cybernetic concept of rationality, where rational behaviour and thought were defined as actions ordered to a higher than random extent. This broad understanding of rationality provides no grounds for demonstrating a qualitative difference between modern rationality and the primitive mindset. This approach would then lean towards the relativist extreme (tab. 1). Whereas with the rules of conduct significantly narrowed down, e.g. to exclusively the principles of logics, it becomes possible to unambiguously distinguish between the modern and primitive patterns of thinking. At the same time, however,



it becomes difficult to establish any clear similarities between the same. Moreover, under this definition, the very emergence of modern rationality is difficult to explain. This approach leans towards the extreme of dualism (tab. 1). The same considerations apply to instrumental rationality which can be understood as a certain everyday ingenuity common to all people, or as highly formalised and matter-of-fact reflection on complex, clearly defined goals and the methods of achieving the same. The former is classified under the relativist model while the latter originates from the dualist approach.

A natural question in this context is: what theoretical approach would allow us to retain the strengths of the dualist model while at the same time eluding its inherent problems? In the subsequent section it will be argued that by perceiving communication technologies as factors influencing the transformation of rationality, the respective biases of relativist and dualist models can be avoided. The value of this approach lies in its ability to account for the unity of human nature without blurring the significant differences between cultures and mindsets.

### **History of communication technologies in studies on rationality**

What underlies the conviction of the significance of media in the context of rationality is the thesis advocating the influence of language upon the process of formulating thought. An approach dating back to the works of Humboldt and Herder. The significance of communication technologies for thinking as such is, in a way, an extension of the basic intuition concerning the influence of language on cognition. Focusing the research attention on the importance of media has been possible ever since the realisation that language, as an abstract sign system, could not have emerged sans a material manifestation. The very existence of language is conditioned by the existence of its material vehicles (speech, writing). Once this obvious thesis is related to the claim that material means of expression do not constitute a natural medium for thought, a question arises concerning the influence exerted by particular media on the patterns of thinking? Particular means of communication impact the way in which language is understood, which in turn determines the cognitive capacities of language users.

The characterised understanding of rationality descends directly from the works published under the Toronto School of social communication, whose main representatives include Marshall McLuhan Harold Innis, Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and David R. Olson. In the context of the issues discussed herein, opinions voiced by the latter two of the mentioned authors are of particular importance. The primary thesis of this approach is the proposition that rationality has a history, a claim rooted in McLuhan's famous thesis that «the medium is the message». The premise translates into the belief that the means employed in expressing and transferring thought impact human cognitive processes, and therefore shape the category of rationality as such (Olson, 1994). Altering the methods of representing a given thought will result in differentiating intellectual habits.

This basic thesis results partially from observations on the historical correlations between the invention and popularisation of a new medium of communication on the one hand, and the emergence of a new style of thinking on the other (Jahandarie, 1999, pp. 199–362). Claims concerning the relationship between the way of thinking and the means by which a thought is expressed are also grounded in the anthropological concepts advocated by Merlin Donald as well as Andy Clark's philosophy of mind. M. Donald (1991) describes communication technologies as external systems of storing knowledge, whose main area of influence is the social organisation of memory. In this approach, culture transforms not only the content of a thought as such but also the primary neurological structures of the brain. The cognitive development of the human race relies primarily on changes in terms of cultural and social structures. Therefore, an external system of storing knowledge may, and indeed does, affect the patterns of human cognitive function. Donald (1991) claims that: „Culture can literally reconfigure the use patterns of the brain; and it is probably a safe inference from our knowledge of cerebral plasticity that those patterns of use determine much about how the exceptionally plastic human central nervous system is ultimately organized, in terms of cognitive structure» (p. 14). A. Clark (1998) speaks in a similar vein: «We build >designers environments< in which human reason

is able to far outstrip the computational ambit of the unaugmented biological brain. Advanced reason is (...) above all the realm of the scaffolded brain (...) interacting with a complex World of physical and social structures» (pp. 206,210). In his theory of the extended mind Clark ventures beyond individualistic epistemology when he defines the subject of cognition as a cognitive system comprising a biological organism and its non-biological tools. In this way, media (instruments) utilised by the mind become a part of it. Therefore, the development of communication technologies (such as graphic forms of representation, various types of writing, the invention of the printing press, etc.) carries considerable significance in terms of historical transformations of rationality. To quote the arguments of the Toronto School authors, the transition from primitive to modern culture was, to a great extent, dependant on the emergence and popularisation of communication technologies and the related new ways of understanding oneself, language and the world.

In order to answer the question of how the reference to the history of communication technologies can account for the transformation of rationality, I will adopt the Kantian understanding of the category. Rationality will therefore be perceived as reflective utilisation of concepts (the element of self-awareness) and a critical approach to one's own beliefs (the element of scepticism) (Goody, 1977). Subsequent argumentation will pertain to the question of how the model of critical rationality, despite its burden of the «Great Divide» error, may be reinterpreted in the light of communication technologies history.

Before attempting to answer the above, it is necessary to briefly characterise the particular mindsets observed in primitive and modern cultures respectively. Traditional (oral) cultures based on direct communication are characterised by attachment to tradition and aversion to change. Due to the lack of an external system of storing knowledge, communicative action is subject to the requirement of accurate presentation of cultural content. The requirement, to adopt Goody's nomenclature, can be termed as homeostasis. In order to satisfy the demands of knowledge transfer, communication and argumentation must be additive, redundant, participatory, and dialogic, while words need to

be closely related to the context of a given utterance. Communication requires intensive involvement.

With the emergence and proliferation of writing, the prevalent models of communication and thought are transformed. Writing, as an external system of storing knowledge, does not demand constant attention of its users and reproduction of traditions. Once written down, information can be easily and impersonally handed down to future generations. As a result, mental energy which, until now, has been entangled in the memorisation of cultural content is released, and the attention of the participants in culture can be shifted towards other forms of activity. Culture becomes more creative as more knowledge is generated, but also as its participants are exempt from the requirement of constant memorisation and transfer of tradition. Communication is freed from its context, becomes independent of the speaker's emotions, impersonalised. It is suddenly possible to distance oneself from the uttered message, to analyse and criticise it from a certain perspective. Linear and concise argumentation can emerge. A phenomenon particularly important in this context is the release of the subject from the pressure of memorising culturally significant content, which makes it possible to engage in criticism of one's own tradition. The critical approach is also facilitated by the stable nature of writing, which, unlike speech, represents thought in a permanent and persistent form. Due to the same, it becomes possible to consciously manipulate concepts while thinking as such is now perceived as the process of manipulating unambiguous and clear ideas. The stabilisation of thought and its preservation in the form of written texts allows its in-depth study and critical analysis.

The characterised consequences of literacy originate from the new range of possibilities offered by a new medium. However, the impact of writing upon cognitive processes and patterns of argumentation is not limited to their aspects facilitated by the emergence of writing, but also includes elements which are rendered more difficult, even impossible, by the written word. The decontextualisation of written communication favours precise and critical thinking not only because it offers the ability to record thoughts, return to them later and analyse them at one's convenience. As argued by Olson, the written word

detaches speech from its living context, thus depriving a recorded message of its illocutive force. In spoken communication, unlike writing, meaning is additionally conveyed through gestures, eye contact, tone, etc. Once an utterance is written down, however, it is taken out of its natural environment; it loses its unique aspects which used to define its meaning. Writing excludes the living context that helps to determine the meaning of an utterance. Consequently, the significance of a written sentence must be additionally explained for it to be correctly understood. This encourages the participants in written culture to devote particular efforts to precisely reconstructing complex, paralinguistic contexts which were previously (in oral culture) given implicitly. According to D. Olson (1994) «if writing cannot capture speakers stance, gaze, tone voice stress and intonation, reading such text calls whole new world of interpretative discourse, of commentary and arguments as to how precisely an utterance, now transcribed, was to be taken» (p. 266). The process described by Olson led to the emergence of the modern ideal of rationality understood as critical, self-aware, systematic, and distanced thinking.

In light of the above, we can now approach the initially posed question of the way in which a consideration of the history of communication technologies can facilitate avoiding the problems posed by the theories of dualist divide. Anthropological data confirms that primitive societies are also not alien to attitudes of scepticism and criticism towards existing patterns (Finnegan, 1988; Goody, 1977). This observation negates the theory of dichotomic division. Will we, therefore, be forced to adopt relativist positions and concede that there is no clear, qualitative difference between the primitive mindset and modern rationality? Communication technologies-oriented approach can offer the answer: «Traditional societies are marked not so much by the absence of reflective thinking as by the absence of the proper tools for constructive rumination» (Goody, 1977, p. 44). Characterising rationality in terms of criticism and self-awareness does not, therefore, imply that primitive societies do not have the capacity for this way of thinking. The difference lies in institutionalisation and accumulation of criticism and self-awareness. It is not true that members of traditional cultures are incapable of critical

thought, as the theories of dualist division seem to suggest. Nor does it mean that when considering criticism present in primitive and modern societies, we are in fact considering one and the same phenomenon, as relativist theories would have it. Critical attitudes are undeniably present in primitive societies, it is just that the principle of cultural homeostasis results in the lack of proper communicational instruments to allow the transfer of the attitudes from one generation to another. Criticism is inherently a matter of individual behaviour and is not an object of cultural transfer. Only with the emergence of literacy can criticism be preserved and institutionalised. The same applies to self-aware reflection which, despite being present in traditional (oral) societies, can only be practiced systematically once a graphic representation of thought is available. Said graphic representation means that ideas can be accurately studied and allows the language user to develop his self-awareness (Goody & Watt, 1963; Olson, 1994). Consequently, alongside the quantitative change, e.g. in terms of the prevalence of rational attitudes, a qualitatively new, perfected form of criticism is formed as a particular consequence of said quantitative change.

### **Synopsis**

The advantage of analysing rationality from the perspective of communication technologies lies in the perception of rationality as an historical phenomenon. A number of philosophical difficulties result from the treatment of rationality as a purely abstract phenomenon independent of historical transformations. The perspective of communication technologies provides useful instruments to facilitate considerations on certain key factors influencing the evolution of human thought. Moreover, the research orientation characterised above seems sufficiently fruitful to account for the basic changes that took place in the history of thought, treated as a series of gradual steps over an extended period of time rather than a single gigantic leap. By referring to communication technologies, the approach helps to steer clear of the trap of ethnocentric evolutionism which characterises classic theories, as well as the danger of relativist functionalism typical of approaches naturalising rationality.

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### **Значення комунікаційних технологій для проблематики раціональності**

Стаття присвячена пошуку відповіді на запитання, яке значення для теорії раціональності має історія комунікаційних технологій та в якому розумінні історичний аналіз зв'язків між культурою і розвитком комунікаційних технологій може бути придатним для вирішення певних проблем, пов'язаних із філософськими теоріями раціональності. Серйозним викликом для філософських теорій раціональності є розуміння відносин між способом мислення первісної людини та сучасною раціональністю, а також обґрунтування єдності людської природи. У цьому контексті постає низка окремих запитань: чи філософські теорії раціональності можуть пояснити неперервність зв'язку між мисленням у традиційних суспільствах та сучасною раціональністю? Чи теорії раціональності можуть охопити єдність людської природи, не стираючи при цьому суттєвих відмінностей між культурами і стилями мислення? Стаття з'ясовує, яким чином історія комунікаційних технологій може допомогти знайти відповідь на це філософське питання.