Errare humanum est? Remarks on the error and its role in culture

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Error

- root "er" (PIE) — moving, setting in motion, or going (es. *ir*)
- Latin, errare: wandering, moving around without any special purpose.

Juif errant (Ahaswerus, the wandering Jew)

Gawain

- Gawain, Percival, Lancelot (King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table)

Don Quixote de la Mancha

Definition of Error

- Larousse, XVII CE: "a vagabondage of the imagination, of the mind that is not subject to any rule"
- Tadeusz Kotarbiński, 1955: "Practical error due to a given goal (aspiration, need) is behavior ineffective due to that goal (aspiration and need)"
- James Reason, 2009: "a generic term to encompass all those occasions in which a planned sequence of mental or physical activities fails to achieve its intended outcome, and when these failures cannot be attributed to the intervention of some chance agency"
- Kathryn Schulz, 2010: "any definition of error we choose must be flexible enough to accommodate the way we talk about wrongness when there is no obvious benchmark for being right."

Error in philosophy

Error for ancient Greeks (Giovanni Reale)

1. logico-gnoseological (popular opinion, *doxa*: Heraclitus, eleatics, Plato)
2. moral (tragic mistake, *hamartria*) (tragedians, Aristotle)

- Protagoras: homo mensura: there is no objective truth, nor error (V BCE)

An artistic fault in "Poetics", V BCE

- "For it is much less a fault if the painter did not know that the doe does not have horns than if he painted her inartistically"
- "You should choose to render things that are impossible but will look plausible, rather than things that are possible, but look unbelievable"

A deception in "On the Free Choice of the Will" (*De libero arbitrio*), IV CE

> "*So, to start off with what is clearest, I ask first whether you yourself exist. Are you perhaps afraid that you might be deceived in this line of questioning? Surely* **if you did not exist, you could not be deceived at all**"

- Augustine, "The City of God" (V CE): "Si fallor, sum" (If I'm mistaken, I exist)
- Descartes, "Discourse on the Method" (XVII CE) : "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I exist)

- John Locke, "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (1690): the language is one of the main sources of error
- Diderot and D'Alembert : "If our passions give us cause to err, it is because they misuse a vague principle, a metaphorical expression, or an equivocal term" (1751-1766)

Edmund Husserl on Immanuel Kant[1]:

"One must be a great philosopher to make great mistakes"

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[1]according to Roman Ingarden

Psychology of Error

Sigmund Freud

Freudian slips ("The Psychopathology of Everyday Life", 1901)

- forgetting proper names, foreign words, slips of the tongue, slips in reading, slips of the pen, mistakes in remembering
- the cause: our *Id* comforts our *Ego*

Being Right

Czesław Miłosz "The Captive Mind" (1955)

> "When someone is honestly 55% right, that's very good and there's no use wrangling. And if someone is 60% right, it's wonderful, it's great luck, and let him thank God. But what's to be said about 75% right? Wise people say this is suspicious. Well, and what about 100% right? Whoever says he's 100% right is a fanatic, a thug, and the worst kind of rascal." (An old Jew of Galicia)

Kathryn Schulz, "Being Wrong. Adventures in the Margin of Error" (2010)

> *Being right is one of the easiest to attain, one of the cheapest of life's pleasures.*

Certainty

- knowledge is a "justified true belief"
- Are we only sure of what we can prove?
- Ludwig Wittgenstein, "On certainty" — there is not usual language game when we doubt in the existence of our hand
- We are doomed to believe others

Augustine, Confessions, IV CE:

> *Unless we believed what we were told, we would do nothing at all in this life. Finally, I realized how unmoveably sure I was about the identity of my parents from whom I came, which I could not know unless I believed what I had heard.*
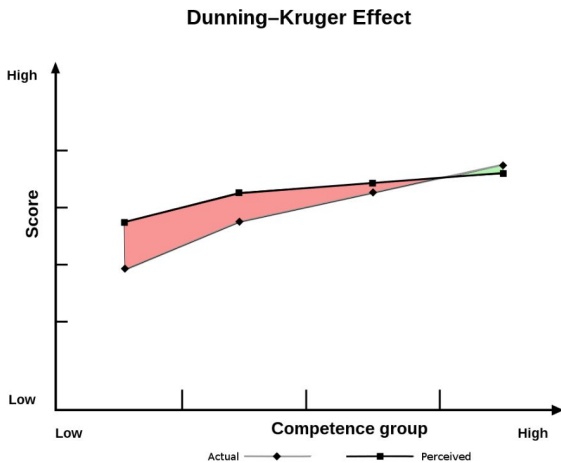
- Anosognosia — unawareness of ones's own body health conditions (ex. paralysis)
- Anton Syndrome (visual anosognosia)
- Confabulations (secondary rationalizations)

David Dunning and Justin Kruger (1999): ignorance of ignorance (meta-ignorance)

1. known knowns (the information that people have and they know they have it),
2. known unknowns (the information that people don't have and they know they don't have it),
3. unknown unknowns (the information that people don't have and they don't know they don't have it).

James Surowiecki, "Wisdom of Crowds" (2004)

- 1927: Harry Warner, the chief of Warner Bros: "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?"
- 1943: Thomas Watson, IBM: "there is a world market for maybe five computers"

Being Wrong

Doubt

Kathryn Schulz, 2010

> "Where certainty reassures us with answers, **doubt confronts us with questions**, not only about our future but also about our past: about the decisions we made, the beliefs we held, the people and groups to whom we offered our allegiance, **the very way we lived our lives**"

- error-blindness
- "I am wrong" — as paradoxical as "I am lying" or "I know that I know nothing".
- the correct way: "I was wrong"
- K. Schulz: no mental category named "Mistakes I Have Made"; instead "embarrassing moments," "lessons I've learned," "stuff I used to believe"

Kathryn Schulz, 2010

- "Drastic error makes us young again, in both the hardest and the best of ways."
- Wrongness "strips us of all our theories, including our theories about ourselves"
- We don't like errors, because we don't like changes

"Ah! Lord Henry, I wish you would tell me how to become young again."

He thought for a moment. "Can you remember any great error that you committed in your early days, Duchess?" he asked, looking at her across the table.

"A great many, I fear," she cried.

"Then commit them over again," he said gravely. "To get back one's youth, one has merely to repeat one's follies."

Wrongology

Two approaches
- A pragmatic, negative, pessimist (Plato, Lock, Diderot, D'Alembert, James Reason): error and wrongness are unwanted
- A positive, optimist (rhetors, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Karl Popper, Kathryn Schulz): experience of being wrong is inseparably element of intelligence and learning process

Relating the three basic error types to Rasmussen's three performance levels.

Performance level	Error type
Skill-based level	Slips and lapses
Rule-based level	Rule-based mistakes
Knowledge-based level	Knowledge-based mistakes

Skill-based performance: Slips and lapses

Inattention	Overattention
Double-capture	Omissions
Omissions following interruptions	Repetitions
Reduced intentionality	
Reversals	
Perceptual confusions	
Interference errors	

- Slips — potentially observable errors in the execution of the action (slips of the tongue, slips of the pen, slips of action)
- Lapses — more covert errors, like failures of memory that they can manifest themselves only indirectly in behavior

Rule-based performance: mistakes

Misapplication of good rules	Application of bad rules
First exceptions	Encoding deficiencies
Countersigns and nonsigns	Action deficiencies
Informational overload	Wrong rules
Rule strength	Inelegant rules
General rules	Inadvisable rules
Redundancy	
Rigidity	

Knowledge-based performance: mistakes

Selectivity
Workspace limitations
Out of sight out of mind
Confirmation bias
Overconfidence
Biased reviewing
Illusory correlation
Halo effects
Problems with causality
Problems with complexity
Problems with delayed feed-back
Insufficient consideration of processes in time
Difficulties with exponential developments
Thinking in causal series not causal nets
Thematic vagabonding
Encysting

Ralph Linton, 1936

> *"All heathen cultures were at best examples of* **human error***, while at worst they were devices of Satan, devised to keep damned souls securely in his net. In either case it was the duty of Christians to destroy them"*

- Charles Darwin, "The Descend of Man" (1871): the mankind originates from Africa.
- Raymond Dart confirms it with fossils (1950)
- Robert Ardrey "African Genesis: A Personal Investigation into the Animal Origins and Nature of Man" (1961): "Not in innocence, and not in Asia, was mankind born"
- in the 1990s there were two hundred times more archaeological sites in Western Europe than in Africa
- A conclusion for philology: Proto-Indo-European language vs. African languages

"To get back one's youth, one has merely to repeat one's follies."

"A delightful theory!" she exclaimed. "I must put it into practice."

(...)

"Yes," he continued, "that is one of the great secrets of life. Nowadays most people die of a sort of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that **the only things one never regrets are one's mistakes***."*

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