

Ch. 1 Introduction: Hyper-rationality

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Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has come to dominate the field of psychological therapy, particularly within the NHS in the UK, but also in other sorts of institutions such as prisons and schools. This state of affairs is reproduced in many other countries across the world. If you go to your GP because of feeling depressed for some reason, in your ten minute consultation your GP is almost certain to offer you anti-depressants or/and the one-size-fits-all manualized treatment called CBT. The ‘treatment’ will try to teach you to replace your ‘negative’ thoughts with positive ones. Your CBT therapist will have little interest in *why* you are depressed (say you have just lost a child) because they think depression to be an illness, rather than a reasonable response to an unfortunate life event. According to the latest edition of the psychiatric bible the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V* (DSM V), if you are still grieving *a whole two* weeks after your child’s death, it is because you are suffering from a mental disorder, because you should be over it by then.

How on earth did we get here? How is it that so many of the great and the good, researchers, regulatory authorities as well as hard-nosed economists and commissioners all come not only to think that there is nothing odd about this way of thinking about human suffering, but also that it is a sensible, scientific way of thinking?

In part, this has come about because in more recent times in *some* quarters of the academy, the notion of scientific knowledge itself has become progressively corrupted and degraded by the self-serving manoeuvres of a number of interest groups. This is somewhat ironic, because the function of the scientific attitude when it first emerged during the Enlightenment was precisely to expose the self-serving rationalizations of the then ruling elites to be fantastical fictions not facts.

Once upon a time in the West...

Once upon a time in Medieval England, anyone caught simply *reading* the Bible in the English language, would be in deep trouble, branded a heretic and quite likely burnt at the stake. The official Bible – The Vulgate – was in Latin. The Church said that to render the Word of God from ‘high’ sonorous Latin into the low commoner’s tongue – English – was heresy as it would defile the Word of God. In this way the priest rationalised and protected his privileged position as gate-keeper between God and mammon. The Bible’s impenetrability for the masses served the interests of both princes and priests, who used self-serving Biblical readings not only to claim that they were chosen by God to do his work, but also to give divine sanction to their political intrigues. Pope Urban II used Biblical imagery to launch the first of the Crusades by conflating the Saracen with Satan, and in the same breath declared a fatwah on Jews everywhere. In 1643, the Puritan English parliament actually passed a law – *The Covenant to be Taken by the Whole Kingdom* – which was supposed to be a Covenant with God. This celestial legal contract was an agreement between the English parliament and the Almighty, in which the Almighty agreed that the English would do God’s work on earth (expanding His Kingdom), and He in turn would look after them. It

was also agreed that God would replace Jews with the (Protestant, Puritan) English as his Chosen People.¹

Having sole access to the word of God, the utterances of priests and princes had absolute authority. To question the proclamations of Kings was treason, to question the Church was heresy. Either was a sure way to book a place in the medieval torture chamber.

Then, in the late Middle Ages this despotic world order began to be challenged right across the land that would come to be known as Europe. Perhaps surprisingly, it was philosophy that was in the vanguard of this revolution. Philosophers like Locke, Hume, Descartes and Kant were amongst the first to challenge this tyranny. The radical revolution that they triggered transformed the world; it came to be called the Enlightenment because it brought the Light of Reason into the darkness of superstition. Kant cried out to humanity at large: *Sapere Aude!* Dare to think for yourself! Intrinsic to the Enlightenment were the ideas of equality and freedom – the freedom to question, the freedom to think. And think humanity did. Rational thought became the organizing principle of society at large. Science itself grew out of this movement, bringing us unimaginable benefits in all kinds of arenas from technology to agriculture to leisure to medicine.

Physics Envy: only the countable, counts

But then, things began to change. Entranced by the predictive powers, advances and insights of the natural sciences, all kinds of disciplines and social practices began to suffer from a kind of physics envy. And so they began to try to emulate the empirical methods of natural scientists in order to garner for themselves the prestige of being ‘science’.

Today, it is hard to move without falling over all manner of things that claim to be scientific and evidence-based: evidence-based policy, evidence-based probiotics, evidence-based decision making, evidence-based fitness, evidence-based software engineering, evidence-based teaching, evidence-based investing, and of course, evidence-based psychological treatment.

But the version of evidence that has come to prevail has meant that the virtues of the rationality of the Enlightenment have become perverted and distorted into a kind of hyper-rationality. Whereas Enlightenment rationality valued the freedom to think and question all things and anything, hyper-rationality uses a distorted and corrupt version of science to close down thinking. Rule-following comes to triumph over questioning and thinking. Where Enlightenment rationality brought freedom and light, hyper-rationality brings authoritarianism and darkness.

The virtues of rationality itself cannot be overstated. It has brought untold benefits to our lives and our ways of life. But the extreme versions of rationality, hyper-rationality, are corrosive to those very ways of life. As William Barrett put it, ‘the untrammelled

¹ Chosen then, but alas, no longer. In recent times Ronald Reagan (and even more recent times, Donald Trump) declared that the celestial baton had moved to the USA. ‘Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all ... who yearn to breathe freely?... God Bless America’ Reagan July 17, 1980

use later thinkers made of human reason [i.e. hyper-rationality], applying it like an acid solvent to all things human or divine' (Barrett, 1990, p.26).

Hyper-rationality is the use of a reductive version of rationality in contexts that are not suited to it. Hyper-rationality insists that only evidence-based claims are valid. This sounds fine until we discover that hyper-rationality insists that this evidence be only of the arithmetic kind, because numbers and measurements are objective and real. If something can't be counted, if it can't be measured, *then it does not exist; it is not real*. This belief then allows all kinds of bizarre things to take place.

The Neem Tree

For example, for over 2000 years components of the Neem tree have been used by farmers in India as pesticide. Then in 1992 an American agricultural company called 'Grace' patented a version of the pesticide. Having patented it, they claimed to be the legal owners of all such uses of the Neem tree. Now if any Indian farmer used the Neem tree as a pesticide on his plot of land, then he was breaking the law and would be sued by Grace. Understandably the farmers were outraged and took to the streets in protest. But all this counted for nothing, because in patent law, a challenge to the novelty claim of the patent would only be allowed if it could be demonstrated that the prior knowledge had previously appeared *in a printed publication*, preferably in a 'scientific' journal, at some time before the patent application. In other words, the courts wanted *documentation*, something tangible as proof. Patents are supposed to be granted when they meet the legal criteria of 'novelty, non-obviousness and utility'. In this case the patent claim was neither novel nor non-obvious, and its utility was already well known. But this being folk knowledge, there was no evidence of the approved kind in print. Because of this, the courts declared that there was *no evidence*. The observable visible reality, the actual use of the Neem tree by farmers for millennia, was declared anecdotal and dismissed as not scientific.

In this hyper-rationalist world, it is the presence or absence of documentation that is the ultimate arbiter of truth and reality.

Encouraged by the findings of the courts, three years later two Indian researchers Das and Cohly at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, jumped on the same bandwagon. In 1995 they patented 'the use of turmeric in wound healing'. Being Indian, they of course knew that Indian families had used turmeric paste for millennia to help speed up the healing of cuts, bruises and wounds. Their use of the patent law was entirely exploitative, cynical and self serving. Astonishingly, their patent also granted them the *exclusive right* to sell and distribute turmeric. In one fell swoop not only had they commandeered the uses of turmeric, but also all commercial activities around it. They were going to get very rich indeed.

Eventually, after years of legal battle, both patents were revoked. In the Neem tree case, the patent was revoked after a manager of an Indian agricultural company was able to demonstrate that he had been producing oil from the tree for the same use as the patent, but prior to the patent. And in the turmeric case, written evidence for its prior use was produced from ancient Ayurvedic texts from 500 BC. However, there remain a large number of patents in place on other uses of the Neem tree as well as turmeric. This kind of bio piracy is only able to take place because the procedures and protocols of patent law are hyper-rationalist.

The point to be underlined is this: that *the idea of evidence itself is up for grabs*. What counts as legitimate evidence (real, objective data), is determined by the ruling definition of evidence. This ruling definition also has the effect of *ruling out* other kinds of evidence, even though it is also objective and there for all to see. This is the kind of hyper-rationalist reality that we find ourselves beleaguered in, in which so-called evidence or lack of, is being used to mystify and deny the existence of self-evident realities.

As things stand today, *in order for something to count, it has to be countable*. But further, and more worryingly, in some contexts the number itself becomes more real than the thing it is apparently representing, so much so that in some instances the numbers *become* the reality.

Rationality, Truth and Madness

The activity of science is supposed to be the production of objective knowledge by rational means. The 'means' themselves are a mix of observation (empirical evidence) and logical argument. CBT claims to produce scientific knowledge in this way, and on this basis assert that its claims are rational, objective and value free. In short – that they speak the truth.

Because the claims of CBT are rational, then any that question them are bound to be irrational. Why else would they deny the objective reality staring them in the face? They must be mad, or at the very least misguided. Even more, the notion of truth evokes its opposite – the lie. What this means is that anyone that questions the truth of the CBT thesis must not only be somewhat mad, in some way they must also be bad. It is in this sort of way that the evidence-based therapies buttress themselves and dismiss those that question them as deluded anti-science Luddites.

However, the arguments of this book are that the claims of CBT are not rational but hyper-rational, and that its observations as well as its logical arguments, fall far short of the standards required by good science.

Neoliberalist Efficiencies

Hyper-rationality has infiltrated all levels and arenas of social life. It is the basis not only of much of what passes for psychological science, but is also the basis of Neoliberalism and the ethos of New Public Management. These three territories powerfully come together, to interlock, bolster and sustain each other, to create a peculiar world view that is promoted as both normal and sensible, despite its peculiarity.

This book is primarily about the first of the unholy trinity, about the 'science' of psychology, and more specifically about the psychology of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. But in order to better understand how CBT has come to prosper, the book will also have things to say about the other two components of the trinity: managerialism and neoliberalism as it was in their interests that CBT should flourish. In return, CBT supplied them with hyper-rationalist legitimations for their endeavours. In this way the argument of the book also functions as a broader cultural critique of the times we live in.

A key doctrine of hyper-rationality is a distorted and amoral take on 'efficiency'. We can see it in play in the workings of neoliberalism. To begin with, neoliberalism uses a

shallow and instrumentalist definition of efficiency having to do with profit and money, to rationalise and legitimate deregulation. It follows this up by calling on efficiency again to legitimate the austerity measures that are deemed to be necessary to repair the damage done by the deregulation in the first place. The actual implementation of austerity itself is devolved to Managerialist bureaucrats who do the dirty work of decimating our public services and institutions. But the dirty work of making 'cuts' and causing harm is made to look sanitary and rational by alluding to 'cuts' as 'savings' – and camouflaging it all to make it look like it is all taking place in the service of increased efficiency. These cuts then produce human distress, distress which is framed as a mental disorder. By this means managerialism and neoliberalism sanitize their activities and then, in a gesture of good will, offer CBT treatments for the unfortunates who are allegedly mentally ill. It is in the name of efficiency that bureaucracies fund CBT over and above the other forms of therapy, on the basis of the claim that CBT's efficacy has been scientifically demonstrated; it also just happens to be the case that CBT treatments are cheap and quick to implement (i.e. they are 'efficient'). In sum, CBT is a managerialist creation, not the scientific one that it claims to be.

Command and Control.

The watchword of hyper-rationality is 'command and control'; its expectation is that we should be able to control everything: not only the world, not only the functioning of organizations, but also our very own beings. This ethos is shared by both, managerialists as well as cognitivists. Richard Layard, the godfather of CBT in Britain, informs us that 'Human beings have largely *conquered* nature, but they have still to *conquer* themselves' (Layard, 2005, p.9). If we can't control something, then this is because we have yet to figure how it works. 'The inner life...determine[s] how we react to life...So how can we gain control over our inner life?' (Layard, 2005, p.184).

Once we have learnt how to take control of our inner life, then we ought to be able to make it do what we want it to do. In this way its command and control ethos claims to be able to conquer inner psychological life itself. As we will come to see, it is believed that you should be able to *choose* and determine what you feel and think. If you feel depressed say, then it is because you have not yet understood how to take control of your inner life. This is where CBT will come to the rescue: it will explain to you how your inner life works; it will then train you in techniques to control its workings. If after all this, you still cannot control your inner life despite having understood the mechanism, then either this is of your choosing, or it is because you are still in the grip of your mental illness. In which case you will be the beneficiary of an additional diagnosis granted by the researchers: 'CBT Resistant'.

Hyper-rationality is infused by two other doctrines that go along with that of 'efficiency', these being atomization and decontextualization. We will come to see how these doctrines start to play out in the course of this work.

CBT's rhetoric would have us believe that the reason that it has come to dominate the psychological field, is simply because it is the best in the field, the most efficient player. CBT has indeed succeeded, but not because it is the best player in the game, rather because (along with its allies) it has changed the rules of the game to favour the kind of game it plays. In other words, CBT's success is a political victory masquerading as a scientific one.

The Virtues of CBT (and their corruption)

But CBT is not entirely without virtue, and in a sense the problem is not with CBT itself, but the hype that surrounds it and the use it is put to further specific ideological, professional and political agendas. In its original avatar, CBT's scope was sensibly limited. Its technology was developed to help people recover from spider phobias, the fear of flying, obsessive behaviours, and the like. This it does very well, and in these areas it is very often the 'treatment of choice'. The problems were generated when CBT's ambitions expanded to colonize *all* forms of psychological suffering. In this it was aided and abetted by the merchants of happiness who appropriated CBT for their own ends.

This resulted in the production of a powerful polarization – at one pole happiness and mental health, at the other, unhappiness and mental illness. The dichotomy is so powerful that it appears that there is no place to stand anywhere between mental illness and mental health, as though the territory between them simply does not exist. This either/or dichotomization has come about in the following way.

It is true that some people inhabit alternative realities filled with terrifying paranoid delusions and the like, and they are indeed what we might call mentally ill. However, there is no 'opposite' to this: there is no such thing as a state of 'mental health'. What there is instead, is ordinary human suffering, which we all suffer from, and which we more or less find ways to manage to live with for better or worse. Modern CBT has colonized not only this territory – the territory of ordinary suffering by medicalizing it, it has also commandeered the territory of the genuinely mentally ill (various kinds of psychoses). Both are lumped into one and then dumped at the pole called mental illness. It is by this means that we find ourselves caught in the dichotomy: either you are happy and 'have' mental health, or if you are not happy, then you 'have' a mental disorder. This is also why so many have come to think – because they are not relentlessly happy – that they have mental health issues.

In this way CBT has joined forces with the pharmaceutical industry and psychiatry in their project of medicalizing ordinary human suffering, and then selling (patented) treatments for that suffering.

The structure of the book

The situation we find ourselves in is the seemingly unquestionable ruling status of CBT in the field of therapy. The work of this book is to question it. To this end, the 'unpacking' takes place in a number of different ways and directions. The deconstruction will call on philosophy and politics, on economics and psychology, on sociology and history, and ultimately, on the idea of science itself.

The official CBT narrative is an unproblematic linear one that is premised on two axiomatic beliefs. The first is the uncritical acceptance of the existence of the 'mental disorders' found in the DSM as 'facts'. The second is the belief that positivist, empirical scientific research methods are an appropriate way of understanding and engaging with human distress. On this basis, treatments for mental disorders are tested under controlled conditions by scientists. This produces scientific evidence regarding whether or not the treatment actually works (the evidence base). If this evidence is thought to be convincing by the *National Institute for Clinical and Health Care Excellence (NICE)*, then it will authorize the use of a manualized version of the

researched treatment. The treatment is manualized in order that it replicate the successes of treatment that was researched. Once a treatment is validated in this way, the job of delivering it to those troubled with a mental illness, is passed onto the statutory agency called *Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT)*. IAPT also produces empirical evidence about its functioning and delivery of the treatment. It produces prodigious amounts of data that seems to demonstrate that the providers are delivering outcomes at the level that that the research says should be the case. This data is further scrutinised by government bodies like the National Audit Office (NAO). Annual reports emerging from the NAO, IAPT and NICE all seem to say that all is well and as it should be in the world of CBT. The whole endeavour is evidence-based, from the bottom to the top. And the evidence repeatedly shows that everything is copacetic in the CBT world. These are simply the facts.

But linearities should always be treated with caution. They tend to be created by imposing a particular ideological reading of events to make them seem rational, inevitable and therefore unquestionable. Ideological readings edit out the twists and turns, as well as the complexities, contradictions and power struggles, to make it appear that they were never there in the first place. The fact is, CBT's narrative about itself is a political narrative that masquerades as a scientific one.

For these sorts of reasons, the book will not begin where the official narrative would suggest that it begin: with CBT treatment and research, as this would collude with the value-free decontextualized account that CBT gives of itself. We cannot fully get to understand how the cognitive behavioural tsunami came to be, without examining the 'climate conditions' that made the tsunami a possibility in the first place. We need to get to know something about the prevailing winds and currents, and the consequences of their interactions with the subterranean shifts taking place in the tectonic plates of science, politics, economics and ultimately, psychology; all of which had to come together to make the tsunami possible. This over-stretched metaphor is a way of saying that much of this book is about the conditions and contexts that came together to produce the cognitive behavioural tsunami.

Having said that, there is the danger that the account given here will simply replace the official linear narrative with another linear narrative. The structure of the book, consisting as it does of five parts, is an attempt to guard against this. Each of the parts is embedded in a mix of particular discourses and disciplines, producing narratives that throw different kinds of light on the tsunami. But the parts don't neatly dovetail into each other. Further, each of the parts necessarily parses over the same sort of territory. This has necessitated in some repetition, in order that each of the parts has some semblance of coherence.

Part I – The Tsunami is an account of how the cognitivist tsunami began and how and why Layard's Utilitarian Happiness agenda came to power the tsunami. In the UK, the Cognitive Behavioural Tsunami was inaugurated in 2005 with the publication of Richard Layard's best seller *Happiness*. A year later this was followed up by *The Depression Report: A New Deal for Anxiety and Depression Disorders* authored by Richard Layard, David Clark, and other luminaries. A decade later Layard and Clark celebrated the success of CBT in their book *Thrive: How Better Mental Health Care Transforms Lives and Saves Money*.

Chapter 2, *The Tsunami Begins*, takes a close look at the substance of the Depression Report as well as the politics around it, as it was this Report that convinced the Labour Government of the day to fund CBT to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. Never before had any kind of psychology been supported and promoted by the State in this kind of way and to this extraordinary degree. It was the economic argument that contained in that report that won the day.

Chapter 3, *The Merchants of Happiness*, unpacks Richard Layard's book *Happiness* which was first published in 2004. Although it is well over ten years old, it remains seminal and highly influential. The reason then for looking deeply into this book rather than other more recent texts, is because not only did *Happiness* kick off the tsunami, it is still a fair encapsulation of the CBT landscape and remains very influential even today. CBT texts that have followed it have not added much to this original thesis. The chapter will describe the kind of Utilitarian philosophy that Layard advocates, the ways that this is used to conceptualize life's problems, and the (cognitivist) solutions that follow out of it.

CBT likes to present itself as unique and distinct from every other form of psychotherapy; as though it sprang fully formed from the head of Aaron Beck or some other cognitivist. But in actual fact all the techniques that CBT has claimed ownership over are found in other models of psychotherapy. How was it then that CBT was able to construct its identity in this way? This is the question addressed by **Part II – Politics of Identity Formation**. Chapter 4, *Master Myths and Identity Formation*, introduces some of the ideas of the sociologist Norbert Elias, which are then drawn on in the following chapter, *The 'Psy' Wars*. Chapter 5 is a social history and overview of the power struggles within the 'Psy' professions in the USA and UK. It details the politicised machinations between psychiatry, psychoanalysis, behaviourism, cognitivism and clinical psychology over the last eighty or so years. The weapon of choice in these battles was positivism, which they each wielded with increasing fervour one against the other in their efforts to prove themselves to the scientific fraternity. It was in this way that the positivist vision was fostered, which in turn facilitated the burgeoning of CBT.

Part III – Cognitivism turns its attention to the genesis of the cognitivist conception of the human condition that has come to preside in CBT. This conception started out in the discipline that came to be known as economics. The first theories of psychology were created during the Enlightenment by philosophers who were only latterly called economists, and at the same time philosophers we would now call psychologists were writing treatises on economics. This is the territory traced by Chapter 6 – *Homo Economicus*. In this chapter we get to meet Utilitarianist economics and also Milton Friedman's Neoliberalist economics, both of which continue to dominate and organize all manner of things the world we live in, including the provision of psychological treatments. But the role of economics is not limited to the part it played a few centuries ago in the genesis of cognitivism. The Friedmanesque turn that economic theory took into Neoliberalism in the latter half of the twentieth century, came to play a key role in the rising fortunes of CBT. To understand how this played out requires us to engage with New Public Management or Managerialism.

Chapter 7 is a critical account of the ways in which the Managerialism uses the rationalist cognitivist ideations developed in economics and CBT to inflict psychological mayhem and destruction not only on the 'workforce' but also the 'customer'.

Managerialism furthers the Neoliberal agenda by representing the casualties it creates as not casualties at all, but unfortunates suffering from a 'mental illness'. It then makes the (kind) offer of treating these illnesses with CBT and the new scientific technologies of Happiness and Resilience.

The final two parts, IV and V get to the heart of the matter.

Part IV – Dispensing CBT, is made up of three chapters. Chapter 8, *NICE: The Bureaucratization of Science*, focuses on the body that has the task of examining evidence based scientific claims for treatments. Based on this evidence it makes recommendations for treatments of choice – this mainly features CBT. We will find managerialism writ large in the political machinations taking place within NICE as well as IAPT. Chapter 9 is a description of CBT treatment itself. When stripped of jargon, CBT treatment amounts to little more than the injunction: think differently, feel different. Chapter 10 uncovers the hyper-rationalist managerialist practices being deployed within IAPT. These practices not only end up short changing patients by significantly diluting the intensity and duration of treatments that they are entitled to, they also put practitioners under unbearable amounts of stress. But the art of managerialism is one of making it appear that none of these things are happening and that the institution is meeting all its goals and targets.

Part V - CBT Research focuses in on the research itself – the head of the beast as it were. Ben Goldacre's notion of Bad Science is insufficient for the situation we find ourselves in, because bad science can be the result of ineptness and incompetence. The more accurate term for the prevailing situation is Corrupt Science; this being when bad science is deliberately and wilfully promulgated as good science. This is the kind of science that prevails in the CBT landscape; it is both corrupt and deceitful. But one cannot fully understand the extent and depth of the corruptions without contrasting it with good science, which is the subject matter of Chapter 11 *Good Science*. The chapter that follows (12 *The Corruptions of Science*) is now better able to delineate some of the chicanery used to bewilder us into thinking that Bad Science is Good Science.

And finally, Chapter 13 introduces 'third wave' CBT and looks at two interlinked studies which found Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to be efficacious in the prevention of Depression. The fact that the second study replicated the results of the first was greeted with much excitement and was convincing enough for NIICE to approve its use as a preventative measure in certain circumstances. MBCT has gone through all the scientific requirements; it sits on the list of IAPT approved therapies, and is thought of as a great CBT success story. This chapter looks closely into these studies and finds the situation to be otherwise. It is these findings that give the final chapter its title: *Statistical Spin; Linguistic Obfuscation*.