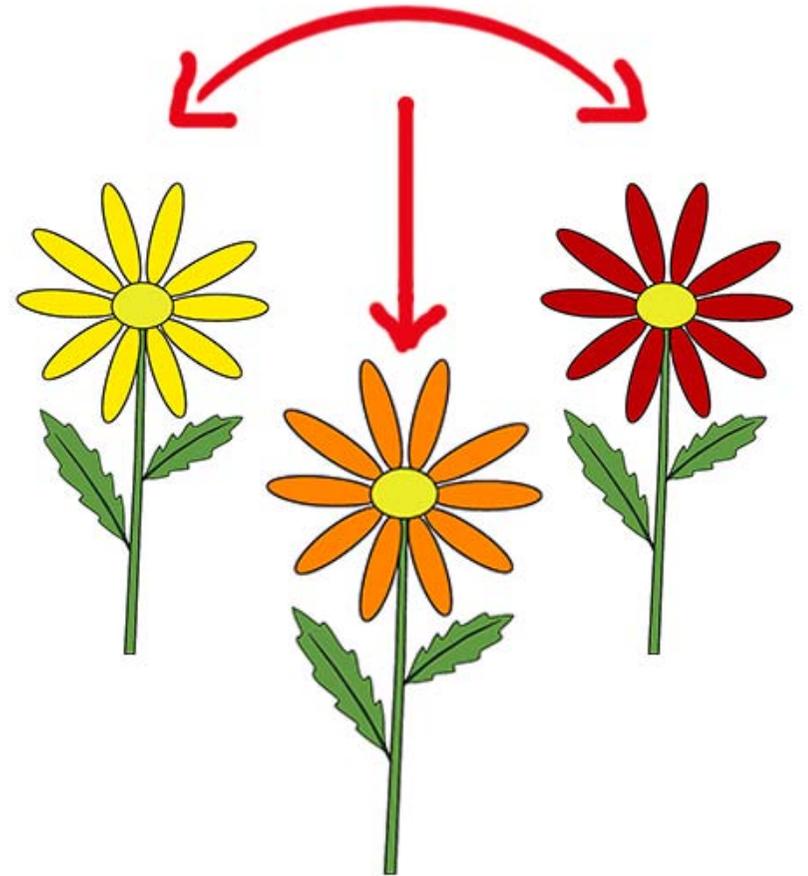


Cross+Pollination

Issue 1



The Rationalist Feminist Issue!

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Welcome to Cross+Pollination!

Cross+Pollination is a zine produced in 24 hours by Jessica Burton. The idea behind it is very simple: that ideas from one field of expertise can inform and improve the knowledge of another field of expertise. The problem is an old one, most famously discussed by CP Snow in his article, lecture & essay 'The Two Cultures' in 1959, discussing the divide between the science and the humanities.

For the first issue of this zine I have chosen two “cultures” I have had the chance to be intimate with recently: feminism and rationality. My interaction with these areas has necessarily been site-specific (the UK and online), time-based (2005-present for feminism, 2012-present for rationality) and mediated through my own experiences of organisations: Bristol Feminist Network, plus online resource thefword.org.uk and London Less Wrong group, plus online resource lesswrong.org.

The zine explores my opinions on the strengths of both fields, common goals and most importantly suggestions for implementing the most useful ideas from one area to the other. I hope you enjoy reading!

Please note, I am knowledgeable enough about genetics to know that a red flower and a yellow flower will not necessarily produce an orange flower. I have availed myself of some artistic license and you all knew that anyway.

The zine was completed in a hurray, suggestions for revision are welcome. My contact details are at the back of the zine.

Enjoy!



What is feminism?

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies advocating the rights of women on the grounds of equality between the sexes. Due to its plural nature, some feminists refer to “feminisms” and it is also understood that individuals will all have their own definitions of what feminism means to them.

There are multiple branches of feminism with their own names, for example radical feminism.

British Suffragist Rebecca West famously stated “Feminism is the radical concept that women are people”.

Feminism aspires to the notion that if its aims are explored as fully as possible, it expands into a critique of the equality of humanity’s entire social system.



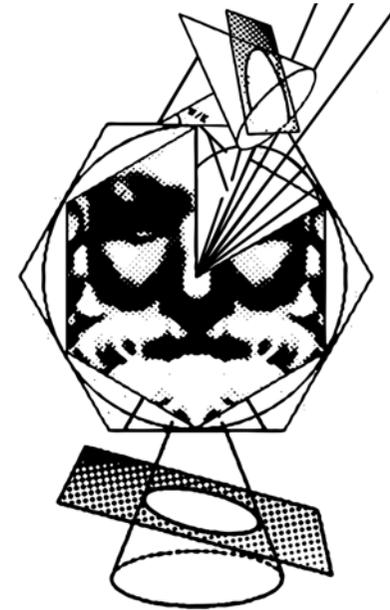
Modern definitions of feminism will almost always talk about eliminating repression or discrimination in any form, such as sexism but also classism, racism, homophobia and ableism, to name a few.

Feminism has close ties to action and ideology of other groups, such as those fighting for equality for LGBT people, people of colour, disabled people, etc. and has developed sophisticated theories of how different levels of discrimination can interact, this theory is known as intersectionality.



What is Rationalism?

Rationalism is the principle and practice of basing opinions and action on reason as a reliable way to have knowledge. It is about the effectiveness of methods for acquiring true beliefs and achieving goals. It is the art of obtaining beliefs that correspond to reality as closely as possible and of choosing actions that steer the future toward outcomes ranked high in one’s preferences.



Rationalists are keen to explore lines of thought that try to describe reality, whilst taking care to attempt to avoid cognitive biases. A key feature of people who practise rationality is updating beliefs appropriately when new evidence is presented and also behaving as if one really holds those beliefs. Rationalists take time to ensure actions match beliefs - another area of life to overcome bias, irrational emotional responses or resist social norms if necessary.



Rationalism

Strengths

- rigorous theoretical analysis & evidence-based practice
- update quickly in light of new evidence
- take steps to avoid (or be aware of) logical fallacies, cognitive mistakes & bias
- make use of complex mathematical analysis
- very broad scope of influences and ideas
- focused on the future
- effectiveness and efficiency is central to strategy
- change is actively sought, with strategies to direct said changes in desirable directions
- celebrate victories/advances

Weaknesses

- young/inexperienced movement
- organisation patchy at micro and macro levels
- difficulty recruiting diverse members
- unsure about best way to tackle large issues

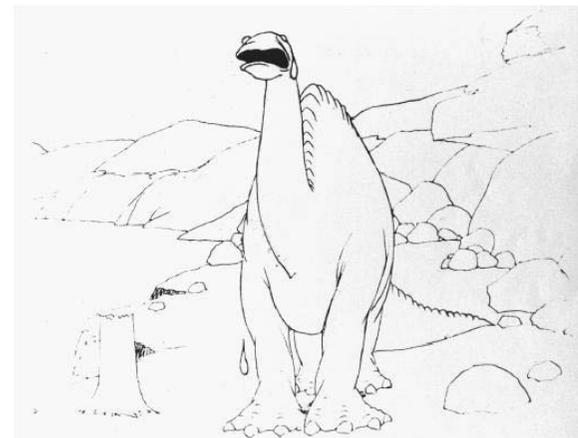
Feminism

Feminism Strengths

- long history - lots of gains/lessons learned
- achieve consensus/move forward despite differing opinions
- rich academic culture, leading to complex and subtle analyses, plus new ideas
- international movement
- good at motivating individuals
- build like-minded communities effectively
- organise well on micro and macro scales
- good at tackling organisations, from small groups, to governments to the UN
- use personal experience/emotional energy as an engine
- aware of inclusion/exclusion barriers, accessibility and intersectionality
- used to tackling very large problems

Weaknesses

- can be slow to change (generational adaptations)
- individuals and organisations experience 'burn-out'
- not very much analysis of effectiveness of actions
- slow to identify weaknesses



The Two Cultures

On the surface, rationalism and feminism may seem to have little in common, one is very much a social movement and the other is more of an epistemological inquiry. Feminism has its academic roots in social & equalities theory, while rationalism's roots are philosophy and mathematics. Feminism is a reaction to injustice, while rationalism is a knowledge tool.

However, there are also very strong similarities between these tribes. Each group is attempting to improve lives, starting with themselves but also attempting to improve the lives of many more people, with ideal being the whole of humanity. Each group engages with academic/intellectual pursuits as well as with emotional life. Each group mobilises through the internet but comes together in meat space. Each group has some very good ideas that would benefit every human on the planet. Each group's early membership has a very specific dynamic, due to its apparent appeal, but each group needs to encourage a much broader audience to be interested in what it has to say.

Rationalism

The relatively recent movement that can be observed on lesswrong.org (hereafter referred to as LessWrong) and sister enterprises Centre For Applied Rationality, or CFAR (rationality.org) and the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, MIRI (intelligence.org) show that this young movement of rationalists is indeed that, a social movement seeking to change the world. Like feminists, the rationalists have hit onto a simple idea regarding the ways people make common mistakes in their thinking and these mistakes are very undesirable. LessWrongers are beginning to seek ways to spread rationalist thought outside of their own membership, for the general benefit of human society.

From my perspective, LessWrong et al is beginning to organise along the same lines as 70's feminism: starting by creating small groups of interested individuals who come together to discuss their thoughts, reading and experiences. Feminism called this consciousness raising, luckily Less Wrong has meetup.com. Central facilitation for these meetups exists via the website, but there is no formal structure for the meetups and little leadership from a central organisation. Practical techniques are designed and taught at CFAR and a broad range of ideas are tabled on LessWrong and other blogs. Academic research into a specific branch of thought occurs at MIRI and there are many popular and academic books supporting rationalisms' topics. Therefore there are resources available to groups who wish to access them but there is little enforced direction from above. As with feminist movements, I suspect this lack of leadership is a relatively desirable state of affairs.



...continued

At this point, however, the groups and bloggers are starting to ask questions around how to spread rationalist ideas to a broader audience, and also how to attempt to recruit more diverse members to its ranks (in a diametrically opposite situation to feminism, rationalists are overwhelmingly male. Race issues are less prevalent than educational attainment; rationalists are over represented by computer programmers and people who are educated beyond graduate level). From this perspective, I think rationalists could do well to examine the long history of the feminist movement, since feminists have grappled with what to do once consciousness raising has become effective and in particular how to mobilise and organise without central leadership. Feminists also have a sophisticated working knowledge of diversity, ie the things that make people different to each other, whether those differences are important and how to behave so that differences can be overcome. This will be invaluable for recruiting more diverse members. Rationalists will also find help with things that are still not even part of their wildest dreams, such as national and international legal reform and changes to educational curricula.

Feminism

Feminism also stands to gain much from applied rationality. Feminism is strong about taking action but weak in something rationality does well: gathering and analysing evidence, then updating beliefs or strategies based on that evidence.



In my own personal experience I have observed no debates concerning the effectiveness of kinds of actions (for example a large scale street protest vs smaller scale lobbying of MPs) no attempt to track changes of anything over time, few analyses of how best to use resources and little collecting and analysing data in terms of assessing effectiveness. This is not to say data analysis does not happen: statistics on crimes against women or rates of health and so on are used repeatedly to good effect, however there is little analysis beyond this, particularly with regard to effectiveness over time. This lack also makes it difficult to celebrate victories, since no-one has analysed if they have happened. Feminist groups are missing the opportunity to give a much needed emotional boost to their activities due to neglecting the maths.

Although I will try to mention later how feminism can teach rationalists how to harness the energy from their emotions, feminists could gain great benefits from studying how LessWrong and CFAR examine human mistakes. Rationalists are excellent at perceiving and attempting to avoid biases, fallacies, errors of judgement and miscommunication that arise from human brains for a number of evolutionary, social and psychological reasons. At first glance, many of the techniques rationalists use to overcome these mistakes seem to revolve around stripping out human emotion and trying to behave in a more robotic fashion, however this is not the case. Sometimes, emotions or other feelings can cloud good judgement and observing why and how this happens is an excellent investment to save time struggling with misunderstandings or poor decisions later on.



Strategies For Moving Forward

Feminists

Learn about the following concepts developed by rationalism:

- Bayesian Updating
- Cognitive Bias
- Rationalist Taboo

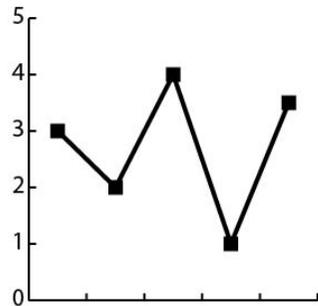


Rationalists

Learn about the following concepts developed by feminism:

- Privilege
- Intersectionality
- Ally

How to... NOT Derail A Feminist / Rationalist Meeting



Do not ask 101 questions - remember the purpose of these meetings are for people who grasp the basics to drill down into more complex versions of the topics. Save your 101s for the socialising after the meet.

Do not make assumptions - it may seem like a room full of feminazis or programming nerds, but all of these individuals are diverse people who are not alike and do not necessarily agree with each other.

Do not be intimidated - every group wants new members, but they may want you to show you're there out of genuine interest, especially since hostile individuals show up from time to time. Once you've come along more than once, everyone will be super friendly to you.

Do not worry about jargon: both groups use complex jargon to communicate and it takes some time to master it all. Both groups prefer if the newbie learns the jargon at home, instead of constantly interrupting discussions. Someone will explain key terms to you after the main discussion is over.



At a feminist meet: do not interrupt to challenge an assertion, particularly by asking for proof or statistics. Women are routinely disbelieved and shouted down, by default, at work, in social life, and in shocking situations such as rape cases. The default in a feminist space is to believe the woman speaking and nigger about the details later.

At a rationalist meet: do not be offended if members are highly critical of each other. Rationalists attempt to be careful about their wording and accurate in their concepts. Members will leap on each other's words to make sure everything is being understood correctly. It is a compliment to be corrected, it is good to be wrong and it is a victory for all if someone's flawed idea leads to a better idea, refined by someone else.

Resources

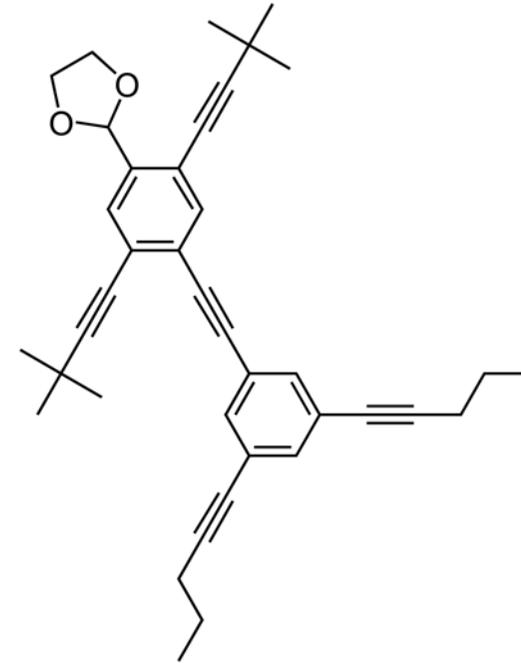
To find out more about feminism:

www.thefword.org.uk

'The Second Sex' Simone De Beauvoir
'The Feminine Mystique' Betty Friedan
'The Female Eunuch' Germaine Greer



Resources



To find out more about rationalism:

www.lesswrong.com

www.overcomingbias.com

'Thinking, Fast And Slow' Daniel Kahneman

Rationalists and feminists: let's be friends!



About the author

Cross+pollination (or crosspolli, or +polli) was created by Jessica Burton mostly on a whim during a week of fun in late October 2013. She adhered loosely to the rules of the 24 hour 'zine challenge (use your internet search engine of choice to find out what that is) and as such has completed the zine in two 12 hour sessions. It is not very polished and suggested revisions are welcome. Jessica has created two long term 'zines in the past, one of local reviews and one for irreverent poetry.



She is currently a tech freelancer and an artist's model. Her most recent blog of wisdom is actually quite good. Find it and her twitter contacts below:

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@ssica3003

