

Present Tense

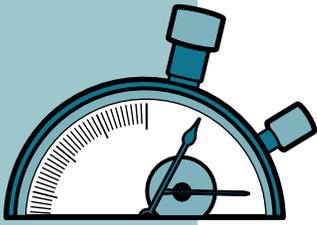
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In Defense of Gut Feelings: Rhetorics of Decision-Making

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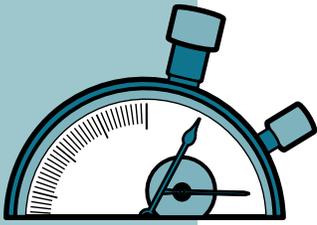
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In his study of gut feelings, Gerd Gigerenzer recounts the following episode. A 21-month-old boy is admitted to a hospital: he is underweight, he isn't eating, he has constant ear infections, and he is withdrawn. One of his guardians is not in the picture, and the other "sometimes missed feeding him altogether" (Gigerenzer 20). The doctor is not comfortable ordering the invasive testing required to diagnose the boy. The doctor instead works to provide a supportive environment and encourages the boy to eat, which the boy does, and his condition improves. The doctor, however, has supervisors who discourage this unconventional, intuitive effort. They demand detailed information about the boy's condition, which necessitates a battery of tests: "CT scans, barium swallow, numerous biopsies and cultures of blood, six lumbar punctures, ultrasounds, and dozens of other clinical tests" (21). The tests reveal nothing, but under such treatment the boy stops eating again. "If he dies without a diagnosis, then we have failed," the thinking went (21).

The young boy dies before yet another scheduled test. An autopsy is performed to "find the hidden cause" (21). Nothing is found. One doctor remarks, "Why, at one time he had three IV drips going at once! He was spared no test to find out what was really going on. He died in spite of everything we did!" The unspoken irony here might be humorous if it were

not deeply troubling and tragic. The imperative to diagnose and the desire to formalize the attending doctor's intuition into a set of procedures designed to expose the best solution to the problem resulted in the death of a child who simply was not eating. Rather than deliberate upon the value of all the diagnostic tests, the doctor's supervisors and the specialists they employed enacted a deadly form of decision science.

In this article, I apply Carolyn R. Miller's critique of decision science in order both to chart its dangers and to cultivate a response from within rhetorical theory and instruction. If decision science is indeed influential in our society, then how might rhetoric create a counter-influence through education, particularly at the university level? After elaborating Miller's critique of decision science, I argue that rhetorical instruction should focus less on "information" and more on "gut feelings." Whereas decision science seeks to rid decision-making of values, a focus on gut feelings foregrounds values and action in the decision-making process. Thus, gut feelings do not operate in strict opposition to something like decision science: I would not have us do away with, for instance, diagnostic medicine. Conceptually, gut feelings make salient the values that operate within any method of deciding.¹



Troubling Decision Science

In 1990, Miller critiqued decision science as a method of deliberation ill-suited to the full complexity of decision-making in conditions of uncertainty involving competing values. Miller defines decision science as a system that “formalizes the elements of complex decision problems so that a set of logical axioms can be used to analyze and compare alternatives, one of which will, it is presumed, emerge as an ‘obvious’ choice” (164).² Miller takes decision science as a species of rhetoric because it attempts to provide a technique or a heuristic for making decisions, which Miller sees as a primary end of rhetoric (163). The appeal of decision science is its appearance of objectivity: complex decisions are narrowed down to a set of definite parameters (e.g., cost/benefit analysis). As a method of decision-making, Miller argues, decision science undermines the necessary complexity of any decision and impoverishes the ability to deliberate important questions (both privately and publicly). Decision science, then, is a troubling rhetoric because it fails to reason about values, which Miller sees as a prime example of what Wayne Booth calls motivism. Motivism is a label for the operating premise in much modern, critical thought that motives (and, by extension, values) are beyond the reach of reasoning and deliberation (Booth 31-38). Motives are either taken for granted or assumed to be primal, unconscious, or otherwise beyond discussion. Presuming a stable set of *a priori* values, decision scientists avoid engaging in the messy business of debating values, which undergird any decision.

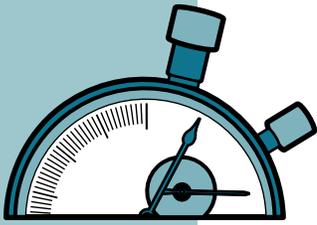
Folded into this motivism is the reduction of problems of action to

problems of knowledge. Drawing on Chaim Perelman, Miller writes, “Problems of action involve conflicts between people; even solitary deliberators negotiate conflicts between possible versions of themselves. Problems of action are ‘essentially contestable’; problems of knowledge are not” (175). The distance to work is probably not contestable; the personal or communal decision to drive or bike to work is. Problems of knowledge, it seems, reduce complexity and avoid the thorny issue of value, which would, we presume, throw the whole process of decision-making into the mess of uncertainty, probability, and opinion—in other words, the fullness of rhetoric. Whereas explicitly rhetorical action would necessarily confront questions of values, decision science seems designed to avoid them.

I am here arguing that a desire against uncertainty, probability, and opinion often undermines effective decision-making. If we assume that good judgment is contingent upon only the quality or quantity of our information, then more and better information is obviously always superior.³ If, however, the problem is one of action (one of human relations and values and contingencies and probabilities), then it is reasonable to question the absolute value of information. I argue it is precisely in the direction of action, and not just information, that rhetoric (already) heads.

Promoting Gut Feelings in the Classroom

Psychologist and director of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Gerd Gigerenzer,



In Defense of Gut Feelings

provides a **necessary counter-statement** to the imperatives of decision science and its over-privileging of information. One of Gigerenzer's crucial claims is that when it comes to making "good" decisions, less is often more: one good reason or piece of information is better than many reasons (by "reasons" he means cues to making decisions). He argues that "[l]ess is more contradicts two core beliefs held in our culture:

More information is always better.

More choice is always better" (37).

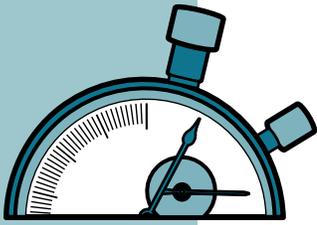
In many cases, too much information and too many options cripple decision-making, as does, in the specific example from diagnostic medicine, the demand itself for complete and perfect information. Having asserted that "[logic] and related deliberate systems have monopolized the Western philosophy of the mind for too long" (19), Gigerenzer writes, "such logical norms [i.e., 'that mathematical logic is the basis for determining whether judgments are rational or irrational'] are content-blind because they ignore the content and the goals of thinking" (94).

Gigerenzer's criticism resonates with Miller's invocation of Booth. In ignoring "content" and "goals," such thinking eschews talk of values. Gigerenzer persuasively argues that good decisions can and do come from incomplete information, simple rules, and fewer options. What makes decision-making possible are the gut feelings that guide and direct it. Gut feelings for Gigerenzer are patterns of response: they are focused on action rather than knowledge, and they privilege action by stressing rules of

thumb—the how and why of filtering information—rather than the implicit value of information itself.

Equally valuable for a pedagogical response to decision science is Gigerenzer's argument that these gut feelings, far from being purely bred-in-the-bone or pre-specified, are cultivated socially and experientially. Although typically unconscious in nature, "gut feelings can be subjected to conscious intervention" (45). His description of gut feelings as cultivated allows us to further deliberate about their value. This openness to (re) cultivation is demonstrated by the study of novice and expert golfers. Unsurprisingly, with strict time limits novice golfers fared far worse than experts. Under conditions that required them to "pay attention to their swing," the novices, again no surprise, did better. However, under the same conditions the experts did worse. Given more choices, information, and time to think, the experts counteracted their habitually cultivated gut feelings. The experts were reducing action to knowledge to the detriment of their swings. However, "when experts' attention was distracted [when information was limited], their performances actually improved" (33).

Gigerenzer ties this activity to experience: "This ability to generate the best option [as defined within the context of the sport] first is characteristic of an experienced player" (35). Such ability is cultivated practically and experientially rather than automatically. Indeed, gut feelings must necessarily be cultivated precisely because they are not pre-specified. As the psychologist Maarten Derksen argues, "the problem, the solution,



and its user tend to emerge hand in hand” (21). Derksen here articulates a rhetorical understanding of gut feelings as cultivated kairotically. This understanding, in turn, can inform rhetoric’s pedagogy in ways that address the specter of decision science as evidenced by my opening example.⁴

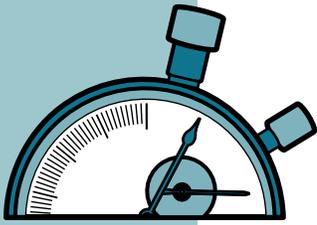
Gigerenzer’s critique of the assumptions upon which decision science is predicated and his qualified celebration of gut feelings provides the one-two punch with which rhetoric can respond to decision science’s encroachment upon and erasure of a more robust, rhetorical approach to decision-making.⁵

Rhetoric’s Pedagogy for Deciding

To return to Miller’s critique of decision science as a troubling species of rhetoric, I ask what a focus on gut feelings means for rhetorical instruction. How might those of us in rhetoric and other disciplines focused on decision-making teach decision-making in and against the context of decision science? If education has traditionally focused on imparting information, what do we make of such persuasive arguments against decision science, which is founded upon a logical, informational understanding of decision-making? I propose that rhetoric attend to and draw upon recent research in gut feelings in order to foreground values and action.⁶ In developing pedagogies that privilege and cultivate gut feelings, instruction in rhetoric necessarily confronts both questions of value and problems of action. A pedagogy that would avoid motivism and the reduction of action to knowledge should focus less on information and more on gut feelings.

A focus on gut feelings addresses how we reason about values. In essence, gut feelings are about response-ability. Gut feelings are patterns or habits of engagement: they are the filter for what information is counted as valuable, and such feelings motivate particular actions over others. Gut feelings are, in other words, the spots where our values spring into action. The gut, however, and as Gigerenzer argues, is not beyond human (pedagogical) agency, and its feelings are not pre-specified. Gut feelings are, in part, socially and experientially cultivated. Thus, gut feelings are themselves neither value free nor beyond rhetorical deliberation. It can no longer be a question of *whether* gut feelings but of *which* gut feelings. We should not oppose gut feelings to critical thinking either; as educators and citizens, we should investigate and then cultivate the gut feelings that lie at the heart of what we call wise decision-making. I mean to promote gut feelings as methodology of salience: a methodology that highlights the values inherent in any method of deciding.

Although fleshing out a full program for inculcating gut feelings is beyond the scope of this article, it should suffice to acknowledge some of the ways in which such inculcation already takes place in rhetorical instruction. As I note in the introduction, gut feelings are not a counter-method to decision science. Thus, many already existing methods—such as cost/benefit analysis, risk analysis/management, stasis theory, tagmemics, and topoi—are appropriate so long as the values that secure and motivate them are made salient *in medias res*. Methods of rhetorical analysis and production



In Defense of Gut Feelings

foreground the values undergirding any rhetorical act. A sustained and engaged enactment of these methods in the classroom works to inculcate them as gut feelings, which, we hope as teachers, work to (in)form students as decision-makers.

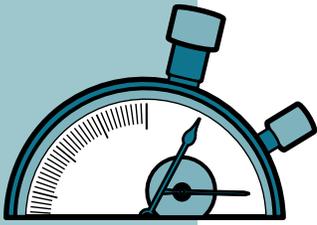
The work of Debra Hawhee on the intermingling of rhetorical and athletic training in ancient Greece establishes an instructional framework that privileges rather than expunges gut feelings. Her discussion of the training of rhetors suggests that gut feelings were a primary focus. Hawhee sees the intermingling of physical training and rhetorical education as “a crossover that contributed to the development of rhetoric as a bodily art: an art learned, practiced, and performed by and with the body as well as the mind” (144). Located in the body and the mind, such an education centers around not the “material learned, but rather inheres in a learned manner, a kind of habit-production based on movement” (145). Hawhee thus draws our attention to the three Rs of the sophists: “rhythm, repetition, and response” (145). Echoing Gigerenzer, Hawhee’s language reveals a focus on action and habits—what I have been calling gut feelings.⁷

The parallels within Hawhee’s piece between rhetorical and athletic training connect to Gigerenzer’s discussion of gut feelings and the habitual experience of, for example, expert golfers. Education, for Hawhee, is not simply the acquisition of information but the rhythmic, repetitious, and responsive habits of action and movement. She draws on Isocrates’ suggestions: “Set them at exercises, habituate them to work, and require them to combine in practice the

particular things which they have learned” (Isocrates 184). This “style of pedagogy” is designed not to promote knowledge for its own sake but to privilege action, and it is this style of pedagogy that is best suited to address gut feelings and decision-making. And it is this style of pedagogy that should be the basis for a rhetorical response to decision science.

Conclusion

In addition to being a call to discuss values or patterns of response, gut feelings are a way around the oft-described problem of teaching rhetoric, which presumes to address the contingent and situational (thus making the teaching of formulas problematic). Rhetoric strikes me as responsive (always geared towards problems of action) rather than strictly informational (largely focused on problems of knowledge). I assert that what teachers of any form of decision-making should teach are gut feelings. It is through gut feelings that we begin to think critically, collect and analyze information, and decide. Gut feelings do not stand in opposition to critical thinking; they stand beneath, support, and shape it. In so arguing, I necessarily invite a discussion about which gut feelings teachers of rhetoric should promote—for it is a discussion of gut feelings and values that protects us from the limitations of decision science and motivism, which can be as damaging to teachers as it is to doctors.



Endnotes

1. Likewise employing Miller, Elizabeth C. Britt—in her critique of recent efforts to “improve” jury deliberations—argues that decision science and analogous efforts undermine and threaten “a communal model of decision making” (104). Discussing those who advocate the use of mathematical models in jury deliberations, Britt writes, “they ignore the possibility that other applications of mathematical probability might come with their own cultural baggage” (120).

2. A current application of decision science can be seen in policy decisions where considerations of the [most effective responses](#) to terrorism replace [debates about the values that undergird those responses](#).

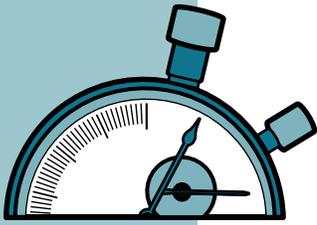
3. This is not to argue that information is irrelevant or unnecessary; it is simply to argue that information is not the only thing needed to make good decisions.

4. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge complications to my own argument. There is an important sense in which, while not automatic and pre-specified, gut feelings are not completely within the realm of conscious human agency. First, gut feelings, as I have argued, are cultivated. I use cultivate to suggest that gut feelings are neither invented nor discovered but fostered and developed within a matrix of natural and cultural forces and affordances. Second, scholars such as Thomas Rickert—who has fruitfully injected psychoanalytical criticism into rhetorical theory and pedagogy—argue that there are many “nonrational,

affective, and unconscious factors that shape human conduct” (5). So while I continue to ascribe to Booth’s criticism of motivism, I likewise hold that human motivation often exceeds our ability to give reasons for it.

5. There is a certain irony here, as Gigerenzer has written another book on bounded rationality, a concept that Miller likewise challenges. Miller challenges bounded rationality precisely because it remakes the same arguments and mistakes as decision science. Bounded rationality is typically invoked to explain intelligent behavior that deviates from the version of rationality described/prescribed by decision science. In other words, it maintains the standard even in the complete absence of behavior that meets it (167). Gigerenzer, I would argue, has moved bounded rationality in more rhetorical directions. Gigerenzer has also argued that early versions of “bounded rationality” have been widely misappropriated by at least two schools of thought (“Striking a Blow” 390), which are of the ilk of the decision science criticized here.

6. In addition to *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* by Gerd Gigerenzer, the following sources are good places to start: Bielock, S.L., et al. “Haste Does Not Always Make Waste: Expertise, Direction of Attention, and Speed versus Accuracy in Performing Sensorimotor Skills.” *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review* 11 (2004): 373-79. Gigerenzer, Gerd. “On Narrow Norms and Vague Heuristics: A Reply to Kahneman and Tversky.”



In Defense of Gut Feelings

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7. Byron Hawk's treatment of vitalism and complexity theory advocates on behalf of a pedagogy resonant with the one I propose here: "Inborn capacities, bodily habits acquired through experience, and explicit instruction in methods through language are all important aspects of educational development" (44).

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