

When I applied to the McNair scholars program as an undergrad, it marked when I stopped thinking seriously that my goal was to go to law school (or to make money), and when I began taking seriously that I would get a PhD (and not make money—so that's one goal achieved: check). It gave me my first opportunities to do extended research on topics of my own choosing, to get feedback from a mentor on multiple stages of a project, and to attend and present my research at conferences. In short, it introduced me, in a very structured way, to some of the elements of academic life.

I barely knew about college, and didn't even plan to go to college, until almost the end of high school, so I honestly don't know if I could have continued in academia without the mentoring of the McNair program. Academic work is so unlike the careers I knew growing up. Academic work is mostly unsupervised and self-directed, and the benefits of working diligently may not show up until years later, sometimes with no positive feedback in the meantime. It's often boring and frustrating, and one can spend years, if not a lifetime, working on the same problem.

I'm supposed to share some personal reflections. But I'm going to frame them using my academic interest. I'm mostly interested in irrationality. Philosophers often talk about humans as being fundamentally rational beings. I don't know if this claim is true: I'm not even sure what it means. I'll assume, though, that it means at least that we have goals and take means to achieve those goals, trying to achieve as many of our goals as possible.

Many philosophers dismiss irrationality too quickly. Kant says his rational system simply doesn't apply to the insane, children, or the depressed (28:255). Maybe philosophers just find it hard to describe irrationality. In fact, we all find it hard to describe how a person can be irrational. We often explain an irrational person as being moved by something "outside" of their rational nature—the addict is moved to drink by her addiction, the OCD patient by her compulsion. I'm going to talk here instead about cases of irrational choices that are explained by mistakes of some sort.

I came to KU as a first-generation college student from a very small Kansas town. My family was poor, so we didn't travel; and the town was poor, so most other people there didn't travel, and I didn't know much about anything outside of that town. I should point out... **What I'm about to say reminds me of when my parents told me that there hadn't always been television**... I should point out that things were incredibly different before technology placed all information only a few seconds away. It wasn't possible to google a phrase like "why go to college?" to see what came up: the inventors of google hadn't met yet when I was in high school. The problem was deeper, though: I didn't even know there was information about college out there at all. I'd heard of Harvard and Yale, and I remember that I'd heard of Princeton and knew it had something to do with education but wasn't sure if it was a college; and then I knew that states had universities, like KU. When my high school counselor asked if I was going to go to college—perhaps inspired by the jayhawk on his desk—I told him that I was going to go to KU, he said that was a good idea, and that was about all the thought I put into college.

I had a good experience at KU. It set me on this path. But there was an irrationality to my coming here. I didn't have any real goals in coming here. I couldn't have told you why I was going to college; or, if I had told you why, I probably would have been making it up. In fact, if I hadn't gotten into the McNair program and begun really thinking about what kind of a life I wanted, I don't know when I would have settled on those goals for my future. This kind of irrational action, acting without having goals, is probably the most philosophically fascinating of the types of irrationality. Do we explain this irrational action by citing some "subconscious" goals I could have had? Or

should we just say that I acted for no real reason, a case of pure irrationality? If so, it was the lucky beginning of some irrational life choices.

I started as a political science major at KU, mostly because I loved arguing and thought of politics and arguing as nearly synonymous. Then I took a philosophy class. Philosophy directly engages with arguments, and you don't win philosophical arguments by raising your voice—which is good since I don't have a loud voice—so I decided that I wanted to study that as well. And then I studied abroad and decided to add a French major. And then I found econ interesting and added that major, and finally I added an international studies co-major before finally feeling that I'd worn out my time here. This accumulation of majors and credit hours is another type of irrationality. The irrationality wasn't a *lack* of a goals but an abundance of them. Specifically, the irrationality was in a failure to notice that each of my rational actions—each major on its own made sense to add—contributed to a pattern that was irrational. This is a familiar sort of irrationality. This is the smoker who can always justify one more cigarette, or the dieter who justifies this one dessert. One dessert won't hurt—it really won't—but all of those “one” desserts or cigarettes together form a pattern, a pattern that a person may not notice when thinking about just this one occasion.

When I finished at KU in 2001, I wasn't sure whether I wanted to go to graduate school in political science or in philosophy. My interests were in rights theory and Marxism, and I wasn't sure which field would suit me best. Before I had to apply to grad schools, though, I applied for a fellowship to study abroad again in France, this time in Strasbourg. I had really liked my study abroad when I was an undergrad, so I decided to go back to France for a year while I figured out what to do.

Now, I think it can be worth taking some time off to make sure you're still doing what you want to do. But in my case, this was a case of pursuing short-term easy gains over long-term achievements, which is another type of irrationality. I'd been unwilling to make hard decisions about what to do next, so I went with something that I knew would be easy and fun. Short-term pursuits are often rational from a short-term perspective: why not take two more minutes on facebook and start the term paper just two minutes later? The irrationality, again, only shows up when we consider our actions from a longer-term perspective, when I think about what I want to have accomplished by the end of the day, which is to have a complete draft of my paper written, not to have spent time on facebook. This is a kind of irrationality that we often see with anxiety disorders, like OCD, when someone performs a ritual that soothes her anxiety in the short-term but, in the long-term, that ritual actually reinforces the anxiety disorder, making it even harder to change.

I decided a year later that I should go to grad school in philosophy, and I applied. I thought a lot of my abilities—that's a type of irrationality that I'm not going to go into here—and I only applied to a few very top programs. I was wait listed at a couple of them and was even admitted into one of them, at University College London. That program wasn't entirely funded, though, so I only went through the end of my master's, then I applied again to PhD programs, and I didn't get in anywhere. So, I took a year off and worked as a legal secretary in a law firm in San Francisco. And I applied a third time to PhD programs. This time, again, I only got into one, at UCLA, but it was good, and it was funded, and it's where I went.

Now, I don't know if it was irrational for me to apply three times to get into a PhD program. Sometimes it is irrational to keep pursuing a goal no matter what. There are many examples, but some of the most dramatic examples that I know of are summiters of Mount Everest. To take an example from just last year, Shriya Shah-Klorfine had had the goal of climbing Mt. Everest ever since she was 9. She'd mortgaged her house to make the trip and may never have had another shot at

the summit. She wasn't willing to turn back when her Sherpa guides told her that she was too fatigued to continue, and she died just short of the summit. That was probably a goal she should have given up.

On the other hand, many people successfully do summit Everest, and they, too, are told many times that they should abandon their goal. How do we know when it's rational to abandon one's goals and when it isn't?

Once I was in my PhD program, I started out, as I mentioned, with an interest in political philosophy. But, as I read more and took more classes and argued with more grad students, I found that I was actually most interested in answering questions about psychology and ethics, rather than the political topics I'd worked on up for years before that. I switched research areas to the study of addiction, which had very little to do with all I'd done before, and it required me to start a lot of my research entirely over, and to do so while also developing some proficiency in both psychology and neuroscience, areas I'd known almost nothing about before. Maybe I should have stuck with the same area and would have made great breakthroughs if I had. Or maybe I would have become so bored with that work that I never would have finished my dissertation.

And this is a problem with all of these forms of irrationality, as well as some forms that I haven't mentioned: we often can't tell on our own if we're being irrational. I can't always see that my actions form a pattern, or whether I'm taking too many breaks from my work, or if I'm pursuing a goal that I should abandon or have abandoned a goal that I should pursue. And this is true of other forms of irrationality that I haven't mentioned, like when we think that we're doing one thing when we're actually doing another, or when we're sabotaging ourselves.

The fact that we often can't tell when we're irrational is a problem if we don't interact with people who know better. You can't ask an alcoholic if you're drinking too much, and you can't ask a fellow student if you're not studying enough.

So, what many forms of irrationality have in common is that they can be avoided by forming a relationship with someone whose opinion you trust, someone who is looking out for your best interests, who will recognize when you should abandon some goals and when you've abandoned others too quickly, who will notice patterns and may know how to correct these patterns before they become too ingrained. In short, by having mentors, whether formal or informal. I'm not going to give life advice—if I *were* to give advice, it would be not to take advice from someone who's just been telling you about the irrational choices he makes—but I will say that McNair scholars are incredibly fortunate to be part of a mentorship program, and it would be irrational not to take full advantage of it.