

21. Fine 2005, Human irrationality and confirmation bias

Kevin Dorst
kevindorst@pitt.edu

PHIL 0450

Practical rationality: Doing the best you can, given your information and limitations, to *get what you want*.

Epistemic rationality: Doing the best you can, given your information and limitations, to *get to the truth*.

Classically it was thought that humans are set apart from other animals because of their greater powers of rationality.

Humans = “rational animals”.

Starting in 1970s–80s: *Heuristics and Biases* research program in psychology claimed to reveal that humans are systematically *irrational*.

Kahneman and Tversky.
Rise of behavioral economics

Fine is building off this research to argue that humans are *epistemically irrational* due to the many ways they exhibit *confirmation bias*.

Confirmation bias: The tendency to seek and evaluate evidence in a way that supports your prior beliefs.

To be “pigheaded”.

Lots of empirical effects! Two ways to doubt them:

- 1) *The Replication Crisis*: Are these empirical effects real/robust?
- 2) *Normative Standards*: Are they really *irrational*?

Do they “replicate”? Many of them don’t, or have small effect sizes.

Types of confirmation bias:

Selective exposure: The tendency to look more at evidence that you expect to fit with your existing beliefs.

→ E.g. choose which articles about Trump to read.

Do you check the New York Times or Fox News?

→ Importance of *trust*.

Biased assimilation: The tendency to be more skeptical of evidence that tells against your existing beliefs.

→ E.g. does the death penalty have a deterrent effect? Presented with both congenial and uncongenial studies, but *selectively scrutinize* the uncongenial one.

Limited use of cognitive/attentional resources.

The backfire effect: The tendency to double-down on your beliefs when you get evidence against them.

→ E.g. reports that no WMDs in Iraq.

But replication failures. And sometimes can be rational!

Defense attorney: “Clearly my defendant is innocent—doesn’t he look like a nice guy? The defense rests.”

Belief perseverance: The tendency to hold onto your beliefs even after they’ve been debunked.

→ E.g. Are firefighters more risk-seeking?

General argument: if people were rational, they’d come to agree!