People, Reason, & Reality

Part I: Reason · Module 1

The Paths to Adopting an Idea

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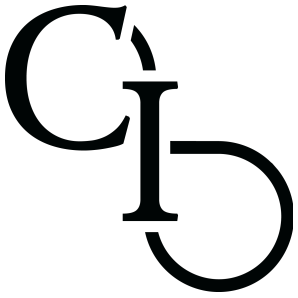

CONJECTURE UNIVERSITY

The Paths to Adopting an Idea

In *The Art of Thinking Clearly*, novelist and entrepreneur Rolf Dobelli enumerates 99 common errors in our thinking, so-called 'cognitive errors'. He defines these as a 'systemic deviation from logic – from optimal, rational, reasonable thought and behavior.' He ends the Introduction to his book with a hope: '...my wish is quite simple. If we could learn to recognise and evade the biggest errors in thinking – in our private lives, at work or in government – we might experience a leap in prosperity. We need no extra cunning, no new ideas, no unnecessary gadgets, no frantic hyperactivity – all we need is less irrationality.'

It's true that less irrationality is good for civilization, for innovation, for peace, for progress. But the mind is a messy place—the messiest in the universe. Clearing it of all the cognitive errors we've ever discovered, let alone the dozens listed in Dobelli's book, is not a guarantee that the mind is better suited to solve problems than it was before the cleansing! How can that be? Because it depends on the *reasons why* the mind got rid of these errors.

Consider: a person who adopts a scientific theory or a religious doctrine because he is persuaded that it is the best explanation on offer is worlds apart from a person who does so because of social pressure, political coercion, or psychological hangups. The same goes for diet, fashion, and habits. Indeed, *all* choices and ideas are adopted for reasons—those reasons are either *rational* or *irrational*.

An idea is adopted rationally when a person is *persuaded* that it is the best among all alternatives. How should one decide between rival ideas? By criticizing all of them and committing (at least in the moment) to whichever survives. The critical process is fundamental to reason, and we will explore it in much greater depth in the coming modules.

For example, John Doe may want to decide what to do on his day off from work. Might he run errands, or catch a movie with his partner, or continue to work on his painting? In making such a choice, he criticizes all of them: running errands is boring, catching a movie carries the risk of wasted money if the movie is no good, and he thinks he might need to learn more about the craft before carrying on with his painting. Moreover, each

alternative is itself a criticism of the others: one reason not to run errands is that he could engage with the more enjoyable options of catching a movie or developing his painting instead. In the end, he chooses the option that has survived all criticisms he could think of—all parts of his mind that have engaged in the critical process consent that, say, going to the movies is preferable to the other two choices. Crucially, the consensus was caused by his own *intrinsic reasons* for making this choice: by the man's own lights, he prefers going to the movies over the alternatives because (say) he'd rather have a fun afternoon than engage in the drudgery of running errands or continue to work on his painting before he improves his skills.

An idea is adopted irrationally when a person takes it onboard despite not having been persuaded of it. Although it sounds like a contradiction in terms, our ancestors were dominated by precisely these kinds of ideas (and self-coercion is still prevalent). For most of human history, ideas were adopted dogmatically, because of social pressure, because of internal pressure, or because an authority declared it so.

Consider a slightly different version of John Doe selecting between the same three choices but with one twist: he has a crippling fear of not completing his painting as soon as possible. Now when he compares his options, he is no longer subjecting them to the criticisms we'd seen earlier. Instead, his sense of dread thwarts any reasons that may arise in his mind for choosing errands or a movie. The part of his mind that is driven by fear over not finishing his artwork runs roughshod over all other critical faculties, preventing rationality from taking hold. He *forces* himself to choose his painting over the other two options, not because he has held each option up to all of the criticisms he can think of and judged painting to be his best bet, but because his terror of not completing his painting has blocked all rational thought about his other options. In other words, he has acted on an idea *uncritically*—that is, irrationally.

You may protest that John Doe has, in fact, persuaded himself that painting was his best option, given the fact that he chooses it. But he does not choose painting as such, but rather he chooses to appease his hang-up. The physical activity of completing his painting is incidental to the real activity he chooses, which is to appease the source of his dread. We will discuss the difference between outcomes and underlying reasons later on in this course.

Irrationality need not be purely internal. Consider yet a third variant of John Doe. This one has no hangup about completing his painting, but his friends pressure John to join

them in going to the movies. If John Doe prefers running errands or painting over going to the movies but still chooses to go to the movies because he wants to appease his friends, then his choice is not rational. He has not persuaded himself that going to the movies is his best option but rather has coerced himself into doing so. His real decision is to appease his friends rather than run errands or continue with his painting.

Now, a person who adopts an idea because he understands it as superior to all alternatives—that is, a person who adopts an idea rationally—is worlds apart from a person who adopts an idea for literally any other reason. When you understand an idea, you know how to apply it, how to adapt it to novel problem-situations, when it doesn't apply, when it could apply but would not improve the situation, and so on. When you don't understand an idea but have taken it onboard anyway, you can't apply it to every problem-situation with which it could help. Without understanding an idea, you can't possibly know when it applies and when it doesn't apply, how to adapt it to novel circumstances, and how the idea might be improved.

To an outsider, it can be difficult to tell whether someone else has adopted an idea rationally or irrationally—at least, at first. But the more often you observe the idea interacting with the rest of the world, the more obvious it might become. Does a person consider the Bible to be the literal Word of God because he has been persuaded that that is the case? Or has he accepted this because an authority told him so? If he has been persuaded, then he will, for example, treat criticisms rationally—that is, as ideas that could, in principle, refute his idea that the Bible is divine. On the other hand, if he has taken on Biblical divinity dogmatically, then he will not (or do his best not to) entertain criticisms of the idea.

Or consider the difference between understanding a bias versus holding to it irrationally. The recency bias is the error of putting too much stake in recent events over old ones, or else emphasizing short-term data over long-term data (there are reasons that this is not even always an error, but put that aside). Someone who has irrationally adopted the idea that the recency bias should be guarded against may go to great lengths to avoid falling into this 'bias', even when committing the 'bias' makes perfect sense. For example, in a discussion about literally any contemporary problem, he may insist on putting it into historical context, regardless of whether doing so actually helps to solve said problem. Or, in discussing year-over-year economic growth, he may insist that decade-over-decade or century-over-century comparisons are *always* superior.

But the person who *rationally* adopts the idea that the recency bias can be problematic is not susceptible to applying it dogmatically or allowing it to steer him away from reason. He has welcomed it into his mind precisely because he *understands* the role that it plays in the world and in the process of analysis. Therefore, he will recognize, even if only inexplicitly—we will return to the concept of *inexplicit ideas* in a future module—that the recency bias is not an inviolable law of nature but a flexible tool to be creatively deployed and holstered.

Another reason that clearing the mind of all biases is not necessarily the right thing to do is that changing the contents of one's mind must always be understood in light of the problem-situation in which it finds itself. Blind insistence on removing particular errors in one's worldview without intrinsic reason for doing so is a recipe for adopting ideas irrationally. Moreover, not all errors impinge on every problem-situation, so insisting on removing as many errors as you can before trying to solve the problem in front of you is itself mistaken.

Furthermore, biases are *conjectures*. To solve problems, you need to guess a solution—that is, conjecture an idea that you think may meet the problem. Typically, your first conjecture will fail, and you will either discard it completely or change it, and try to solve the problem again. If your first conjecture relies on some bias, then *maybe* it fails because of this bias. But maybe not. Changing conjectures is a creative process, and one must be opportunistic when thinking about how to improve them. In short—there is no guarantee that any cognitive error or bias is the reason why a given idea isn't working.

On the contrary, cognitive errors are not the only errors that can sully a mind. This is yet another reason why clearing the mind of bias is not necessarily the right thing to do—every mind is unique, with its own collection of errors, knowledge, and interests. So removing cognitive errors can't reliably help people solve their problems. Dogmatically favoring the removal of cognitive errors over all other errors is itself a bias, and one many of us should be aware of—though, according to the very logic of this argument, not everybody!

We have seen that the relationships between errors, problem solving, thinking, and rationality are not as straightforward as common sense might suggest. In the next module, we turn to the counterintuitive role that *evidence* plays in rationality.

This module is the first release in Conjecture University's inaugural course, People, Reasons, & Reality, the first of many courses to come.

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