

★ Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters
Steven Pinker.

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In this revealing pop take on the mind and society, Harvard psychologist Pinker (*The Better Angels of Our Nature*) investigates the nature of straight thinking and the many ways it goes crooked. He lays out the basics of formal logic, probability, and statistics, and dissects common fallacies that violate them. The “argument from authority,” for example, takes pronouncements by “experts” as unquestionable gospel, while “availability bias” makes people falsely believe that nuclear accidents that garner huge news coverage are more dangerous than less-covered coal-fired power plants, and the Texas sharpshooter fallacy—drawing a bulls-eye around a bullet hole after one shoots at a barn—is widespread as a way of passing off random data points as accurate predictions. Pinker skewers all manner of misguided thinking, myths, and “cockamamie conspiracy theories” across the ideological spectrum, from the Stop-the-Steal right to the “left-wing monoculture” that makes universities “laughingstocks for their assaults on common sense.” He manages to be scrupulously rigorous yet steadily accessible and entertaining whether probing the rationality of Andrew Yang’s presidential platform, Dilbert cartoons, or Yiddish proverbs. The result is both a celebration of humans’ ability to make things better with careful thinking and a penetrating rebuke to muddleheadedness.

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