

saturdayreview

Rationality by Steven Pinker review — ignore the loons: our fellow humans are a reasonable bunch

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Steven Pinker makes the optimistic case for sweet reason. Review by Tom Chivers

The past 18 months have, in a way, been a stark advertisement for the benefits of believing true things. True beliefs about the

dangers of Covid [<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-3g6vmvrpt>]

and the things that reduced them have saved lives; false beliefs have ended lives, in fairly large numbers. It has been a good time to be rational.

You may think it unfortunate, then, that this has also been a time when humanity is widely believed to have reached peak irrationality. You can't move for crazy beliefs, often held by influential people — the Democrats run a paedophile ring out of a Washington pizzeria; climate change is a Chinese hoax; biological sex doesn't exist. And you may also think it unfortunate that the human brain is so beautifully designed for irrationality, crammed as it is with flaws such as confirmation bias, as you'll have read in pop-psychology books with names like

Predictably Irrational

Steven Pinker [<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/steven-pinker-interview-take-the-knee-i-d-rather-write-an-op-ed-vk6l229wn>]

, in his new book

Rationality

, wants to make the opposite case: man really is the rational animal. Hunter-gatherer tribes in the Kalahari, he points out, will use highly sophisticated methods to establish facts: if the tracks of a kudu show that it rested to one side of a tree, they will use the angle of the sun to estimate the time at which that side was in shadow, and thus how long ago the antelope passed. The tribe's survival rests on the ability to assess those facts accurately, so that their hunts are successful and they can eat.

Pinker spends most of the book on the first clause of the subtitle, what rationality is. He talks about different aspects of it. Formal logic, putting together syllogisms such as "all things made from plants are healthy; cigarettes are made from plants; therefore cigarettes are healthy", and our ability to tell whether those syllogisms are valid or not. Game theory, making decisions that take into account other people's decisions, and how individually rational behaviour can lead to collectively irrational situations. Probability and reasoning under uncertainty.

Yet in the end they all come down, it's fair to say, to believing true things and making decisions that achieve your goals. A person is rational in so far as they make the best use of the evidence available to believe true things about the world and

to act in ways that achieve things that they want to achieve.

He makes a good case for the basic rationality of humans — he points out that many of the things we consider irrational, such as children who “fail” the marshmallow test and eat one marshmallow now rather than waiting 15 minutes and having two, are not obviously so. A child who doesn’t trust the experimenter might not believe that the second marshmallow is forthcoming. By analogy, someone who doesn’t believe that the pension fund will still be solvent in 40 years might be rational not to invest in a pension, even if the numbers supposedly line up.

Similarly, our tendency to believe crazy things such as

[QAnon conspiracies \[https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/my-sister-is-gone-the-britons-lost-to-qanon-80mf8gv0l\]](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/my-sister-is-gone-the-britons-lost-to-qanon-80mf8gv0l)

stems, he says, from the different roles beliefs play in our minds. Our beliefs about our daily lives, such as how to get our kids to school or the best way to do our job, need to be accurate and so usually are. But other beliefs, about far-off things like the universe or politics, often play a role that is more to do with signalling group membership than directly navigating the world. It may be entirely rational to be a climate-change denier if your social circle is all climate-change deniers: your belief in climate change will have almost no effect on the actual climate, but will have a profound effect on your ability to get on with your friends.

It is, of course, a matter of perspective — he acknowledges that irrationality is real. When we are told that one treatment will save 200 out of 600 patients, but another treatment has a one third chance of saving all 600 but a two thirds chance of saving nobody, we want the first. When we’re told that one treatment will let 400 people die, but the other has a one third chance of no one dying and a two thirds chance of 600 people dying, people want the second. But they’re the same choice in different words. Pinker, though, wants to say that the fashion for pointing out human irrationality has gone too far, and wants to emphasise how rational we really are.

It’s a fun, fast-paced book — Pinker, as always, is a lucid writer and a wise one. And he explains tricky concepts simply and well. That said, if you’re a long-term reader of his, you may not find that it reaches the heights of his great works —

The Language Instinct

,

How the Mind Works

and

The Better Angels of our Nature

in particular. Those books felt like a glimpse into a great mind working at the cutting edge of human understanding.

Rationality

is thoughtful, intelligent and correct, but there are many books on the rationality or otherwise of humanity that contain much of the same material. Perhaps it’s diminishing returns — the more books you read by the same insightful author, the fewer insights you’ll glean from each new one — and a second-tier Pinker book is still better than most authors’ best work, but it’s not as knife-sharp as some of his earlier offerings. Julia Galef’s recent book

The Scout Mindset

covers similar ground, but is a better book.

The last two chapters, on why we think rationality is declining and why rationality matters, are the strongest. The last, in particular, a stirring defence of the importance of believing true things and the process of reason, science and argumentation, could have been much longer. He makes the case that reason drives almost all of humanity’s progress — that even apparently morally inspired social reforms such as the abolition of slavery or women’s suffrage were sparked by logical, rational argument. I wish that chapter was expanded to more of the book; I buy the argument he’s making, but people who don’t believe it already probably won’t be persuaded.

Still, it's a good read. If nothing else, it's too easy at the moment to believe that we're surrounded by idiots — fools to the left of us, jokers to the right; antivaxers, conspiracy theorists and all these things. It's good to be reminded that actually humans are pretty bright and have done pretty well.

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Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters

Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters

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