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Second thoughts

Our irrational behaviour means we're doomed – it's time to think again,
says **Professor Steven Pinker...**

Think with Pinker

Thursday 4.00pm **Radio 4**

DON'T EVER LET anyone tell you how to think. Unless it's Steven Pinker. Cognitive scientist, Harvard Professor of Psychology, author, broadcaster, two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist and all-round immense brainbox, Pinker is now harnessing his industrial-strength intellect to improve ours.

With a new book, *Rationality*, and a 12-part **Radio 4** series starting this week, the esteemed Professor aims to provide us all with "the tools of reasoning that are essential in avoiding folly in our personal lives and public policies". Put less professorially, he aims to "get you thinking about thinking – and maybe to help you think better".

It's an "urgent" mission, Pinker says, citing "deadly threats to our health, our democracy and the liveability of our planet" – which he says are all solvable if we're rational enough to accept the solutions. But he carefully avoids declaring (despite the apparent evidence on our social media feeds) that we're worse at thinking now than we used to be: "I always resist jumping from the observation that something is prevalent now, to the conclusion that it must have gotten worse.

"That's a common fallacy linked to something called 'availability bias', where the ready availability of recent examples causes you to overestimate the thing's actual frequency. We also have a tendency toward nostalgia, and it's been said that the best explanation for 'the good old days' is a bad memory. So I

don't know if we're in the midst of more conspiracy theorising, medical quackery and paranormal belief than we used to be, but we don't appear to be improving, which we should be. In fact I recently plotted some data on belief in astrology – and, to my crushing disappointment, it showed that that belief has not decreased in the last 50 years."

And the problem is anything but academic, Pinker points out. "One concrete example we're living through right now, especially in the US, is resistance to vaccination," he says. "That's killing people, bogging down the economy and affecting everyone's life so that we still have to wear masks and suffer travel restrictions. Declining the vaccine is irrational, because the cost-benefit analysis shows your chance of suffering adverse reaction is dwarfed by the reduced likelihood of getting potentially fatal Covid.

"But nonetheless, people resist – partly from primitive intuitions of contamination, because the idea of injecting a bit of a disease agent into the body is deeply counterintuitive; and largely because of another logical fallacy called the 'myside bias' where, because your opponents (political or otherwise) support something, you and your tribe oppose it."

Rationality isn't just a pragmatic issue

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for the 67-year-old Canadian-American, it's an ethical one: "Many of the moral accomplishments that we're most proud of – the abolition of slavery, equality of women, decriminalisation of homosexuality – began with rational arguments. It's because of rationality that we don't burn witches now, or take the family to laugh at the insane for entertainment. Although we do have cable news shows..."

The answer to our epidemic of irrationality, Pinker tells us (with an admirable refusal to let modesty trump logic) is to "read

my book"; but he also believes that "the tools of rationality should be taught early on in our educational curriculum". Which is all very well for the young, of course, but what about the grown-ups?

"Actually I'd start with the editors of our major journalistic outlets. Not because they're biased, but because of the way journalism is unaware of its inbuilt distortions: because it reports on events [not trends], it feeds that availability bias. So we think, for instance, that terrorist attacks are a major threat to life, when in fact it's trifling compared with day-to-day homicides."

The book, peppered with anecdotes and *Star Trek* references, is certainly a more entertaining read than it might sound ("It's a compromise. I suggested 600 pages, my editor suggested a 30-second TikTok video – facetiously, I think – and we met in the middle at 300 pages"). And the radio show, *Think with Pinker*, is a sprightly listen, with guests each week ranging from British mathematician and presenter Hannah Fry to Bill Gates.

AND IT'S NOT just for public policy makers, either. "Rationality is important on a personal level too," adds Pinker. "Data suggests that people who are more resistant to cognitive and statisti-

cal fallacies are less likely to get sick, to get into accidents. They lead better lives!"

But does the data indicate who these "more resistant" people are? Could the Prof perhaps confirm that one group of people – one gender, just for instance – is more rational than another?

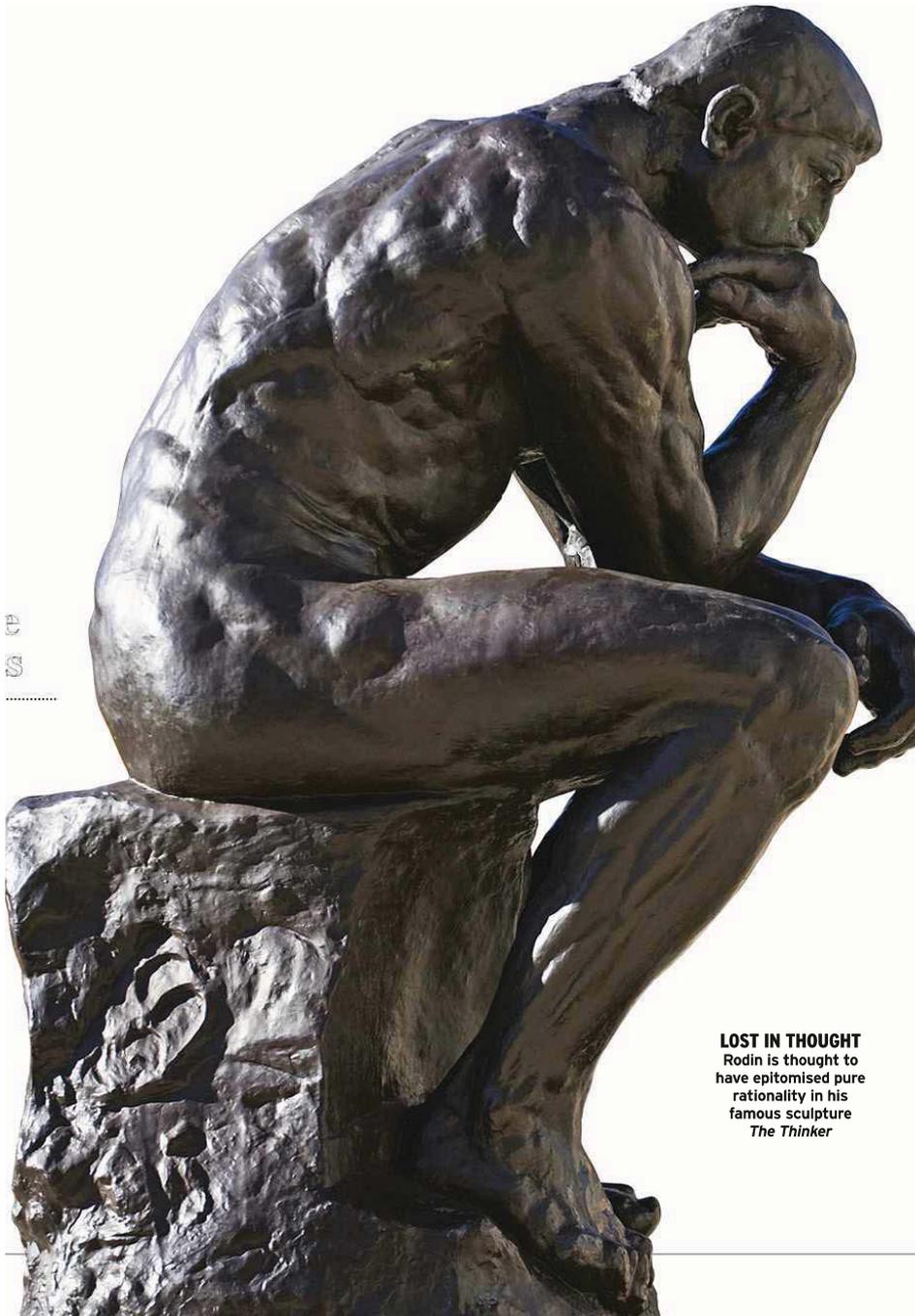
"I doubt that there's a sex difference in rationality," he says, "but I would say, only somewhat cheekily, that if anything, it may be that men are less rational." That's rubbish, I tell him, reaching fast for my myside bias; how could that possibly be true? "Because men are more susceptible to the kind of dominance psychology that can get in the way of rationality," he answers calmly. "The desire to win an argument at all costs, using whatever weapons – dominance gestures, the imperious stare, the interruption, the loud voice – these can all get in the way of rationality."

It's impossible to argue, of course, so I pose one last question instead. Do he and his philosopher wife Rebecca Goldstein manage to stay entirely rational when things get heated in the Pinker household? "Well..." he replies, "we do our best." **ED GRENBY**

'It's because of rationality that we don't burn witches'
'It may be that men are less rational than women'



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LOST IN THOUGHT
Rodin is thought to have epitomised pure rationality in his famous sculpture *The Thinker*