Irrationality

1. Confirmation Bias and Cognitive Filtering: “The first step is admitting that you have a problem.” Michael Huemer is referring here to the fact that most people are irrational, but do not want to admit it. As early as 400 years ago, Francis Bacon noticed a strange psychological phenomenon, which fostered irrationality; a phenomenon we now call “confirmation bias”.

**Confirmation Bias:** The tendency to favor evidence or information that confirms one’s pre-existing belief while overlooking or discounting evidence that disconfirms it.

Bacon noticed that human beings have a tendency to accept without question those things which conform to their pre-existing beliefs, and either ignore or rigorously scrutinize those things that oppose them. While this tendency is generally advantageous—for instance, you might happily accept without question someone’s claim that they saw a squirrel today, you would seriously question someone’s claim that they saw a unicorn today—this tendency is often used in instances where it should not be. Bacon cited religious belief as one of these instances. Moral and political beliefs are also subject to confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias can have bad consequences. For instance: If we think that some person (or group of people) is good, we will have a tendency to overlook their wrongdoings. On the other hand, if we think that someone (or some group of people) is bad, we will tend to find only evidence that confirms this. This can be especially dangerous if the negative sentiments are motivated by underlying racism or sexism. Regarding moral beliefs, confirmation bias can cause us to be overly critical of, and see no merit in arguments which oppose our own position; and not critical enough toward arguments which support our own positions.

Such biases may not be wholly our fault, though; i.e., they may not be due to intentional negligence. For, the brain NATURALLY filters out a majority of the information it receives in order to keep us sane. Constantly, we are bombarded with sense-data. Hundreds of people pass you on the sidewalk, a million leaves are shiver in the breeze, a thousand cars pass by, 10,000 products fill the shelves in the grocery store, and so on.

If we had to pay attention to ALL OF THAT we would never get anything else done. Naturally, the brain has a built-in “spam filter” which filters out 99% of the world around us, and delivers only the information that it takes to be relevant to our consciousness. Consider this example:
Cognitive Filtering (example): Have you ever bought a new pair of shoes, or a new phone, or a new car, or laptop, or whatever, and suddenly the next day you notice that EVERYONE has those shoes, or that phone, or that car, or laptop, etc.? It has happened to all of us. Now, which is more likely: That yesterday a thousand other people went out and bought the same item that you did, or rather that they’ve had those items for quite some time and you are just now NOTICING this?

Surely the latter is more likely. This is because your brain is constantly FILTERING the data that it receives from your senses. Once you buy a certain product, your brain may tag that item as suddenly “relevant” and be more likely now to deliver it to your consciousness. Unfortunately, evidence that CONFIRMS your pre-existing beliefs is far more likely to be tagged “relevant” than evidence which DISCONFIRMS them. So, you may be hard-wired to not even NOTICE evidence that contradicts your present beliefs.

2. Perception: Now stare at this Dancing Girl illusion for a while. Which way is the dancer spinning?

About 50% of people say she’s spinning clockwise, and 50% say she’s spinning counter-clockwise. For some people, she changes direction repeatedly without warning. Don’t believe me? Stare at her a little longer and see if you can get her to change directions.

In reality the figure is a merely 2-dimensional silhouette of someone spinning—and this silhouette looks the same no matter which direction someone is spinning—but our brains IMPOSE 3 dimensions on the image and, to make sense of this third dimension of depth and the appearance of spinning, also imposes a DIRECTION upon that spinning.

Consider also this audio illusion, where you will hear something different depending on what you are looking at!

These are just a couple of examples. As it turns out, in general, not only does the brain filter out a majority of the information it receives, but, of the information that DOES get presented to your conscious mind, it has gone through an interpretation filter—and this filter does not always present reality to you accurately. In short, our perception of the world is quite limited and flawed. So, we must take the utmost care when forming beliefs about the world, and not just accept or trust every idea or perception that we have without scrutiny.
3. Moral Divergence: There is widespread disagreement about religion, politics, and morality. Furthermore, this disagreement is persistent (quite difficult to resolve), polarized (people tend to gravitate toward one of two opposing camps), and people’s feelings about these issues are very strong. But, why would this be? Michael Huemer suggests that the disagreement is the result of people being irrational. For example, note some of the following very odd features of political, religious, and moral beliefs:

- **Strength of beliefs if evidence is poor:** Sometimes people say there is so much disagreement because these issues are just too complicated for anyone to figure out, or that there is simply not enough evidence to figure them out. But, then, why would people feel so STRONGLY about them? Imagine that someone told you, “I have no idea if Jack will like The Hobbit. I don’t know him, so I have no evidence either way. Also, I’ve heard his movie tastes are just really complicated and impossible to figure out. But, I believe VERY STRONGLY that he will not like it. In fact, I am willing to bet my entire savings account on it.” Surely it is irrational to believe something so strongly whenever an issue is so complex or difficult? In short, if the evidence for moral, political, and/or religious beliefs is very poor, then people are being irrational by holding such strong and conclusive beliefs about these issues.

- **Polarization of beliefs if evidence is poor:** Now consider the fact that, people do not just disagree, but they disagree in a very POLARIZED way. By this, I mean that there are basically only TWO main clusters of beliefs that people have. For instance, (1) it is extremely common to be very religious, conservative, against abortion, against same-sex marriage, and against re-distributive taxation, and (2) it is extremely common to be less religious, liberal, and in favor of abortion, same-sex marriage, and re-distributive taxation. If there is no strong evidence regarding these issues, it is incredibly bizarre that such large segments of the population are attracted to one of these two polarized camps. In short, if there was no evidence for something, we would EXPECT to see either (1) no one having a strong belief one way or another, or (2) dozens of clusters of beliefs across society—but NOT exactly TWO clusters of beliefs.

- **Divergence of beliefs if evidence is strong:** On the other hand, lots of people claim that moral, political, and religious issues are NOT so complex, and that there IS a wealth of evidence for one side or the other. But, then, why do we have so many divergent beliefs? In our country, there is a HUGE disparity between liberals and conservatives for instance (we only need
look to the last election where the vote was split almost 50/50 to see this). In short, if the evidence for certain moral, political, and/or religious beliefs is very strong, then people are being irrational for being so divided on these issues.

- **Polarization of beliefs if evidence is strong:** Furthermore, if the evidence for each of these issues is STRONG, then polarization is very bizarre. For, in that case, the facts have systematically led approximately HALF of all U.S. citizens to hold exactly all of those beliefs that are FALSE. In short, if the evidence for moral, religious, and political beliefs is strong, then at least half of the U.S. population is being extremely irrational.

4. The Sources of Irrational Bias: Michael Huemer’s suggestion is that all of the above is evidence of irrationality. People naturally tend toward certain beliefs without any evidence (or even CONTRARY to the evidence) because they are biased—and these biases blind them to the truth. Let’s look at some factors that often lead to biases:

- **Self-interest:** You are more likely to believe in something if it will benefit yourself, or some group that you are a part of. For instance, the rich are more likely to be against taxation of the rich, minorities are more likely to be in favor of affirmative action, drug users are more likely to be in favor of drug legalization, etc. Have you ever felt strongly about a controversial issue, where the side you believe in would benefit you more than the side you disagree with? Probably. But, the fact that something will benefit you is not always evidence that it is true, or ought to be done, etc.

- **Social bonding:** You are more likely to believe in something if people you admire, are friends with, or WANT to be friends with, or date, etc., already believe it. People tend to bond over shared beliefs. Have you ever told someone you liked something just to impress them? Probably. But, the fact that someone you want to impress believe something is not itself evidence that that thing is true.

- **Coherence:** You are more likely to believe in something if it supports what you already believe, and you are more likely to discount something if it undermines what you already believe. Have you ever seen something very strange that doesn’t make sense, only to dismiss it as probably a figment of your imagination or a mistake? Probably. People are very good at dismissing evidence or experiences if they do not fit into the framework of their current beliefs.
• **Self-image:** You are more likely to believe in something if it fits the self-image that you want to create. For instance, someone who wants to seem “tough” might be in favor of guns and war, while someone who wants to seem gentle and kind might be in favor of protecting animal and helping the poor. Have you ever believed in something, and that belief helped to shape the personality you wanted to portray to others? Probably. But, the fact that a belief implies a certain persona that you like is not evidence that the belief is true.

**5. The Solution to Irrationality:** How can we avoid irrationality? Some tips:

(1) **Identify your biases:** Ask yourself: Do you have biases toward any issue? Do you hold any of your beliefs irrationally? Here are some signs that you might:

• The policies/views you endorse are those you would benefit most from.
• You become angry when someone disagrees with you.
• You have strong opinions about a topic without gathering sufficient evidence for both sides of the issue.
• When (if) you begin gathering evidence for some issue, your beliefs do not change at all.
• You believe that everyone who holds the opposite view is evil, stupid, etc. (It is unlikely that 50% or more of the population are evil, idiotic, etc.)

(2) **Know what your opponent believes:** When people hear an argument whose conclusion they agree with, they typically accept it at face value without questioning its premises. When they hear an argument whose conclusion they DISAGREE with, they will typically scrutinize its premises to find something wrong.

But, most people are actually much worse than this. In light of social bonding and coherence, it is actually the case that most people almost SOLELY surround themselves with like-minded friends, news sources, etc. In that case, not only do people tend to discount an opposing argument when they hear it, THEY ALMOST NEVER HEAR IT in the first place (since they tend to avoid contact with those who disagree with themselves).

When considering an issue rationally, however, it is important to gather evidence from BOTH SIDES. How can you know that your opponent is wrong when you cannot even state what her argument for her view is?
(3) Question the evidence: People almost always present their own view in a biased way. Did you ever get in trouble, and then when it came time to tell your side of the story, you skewed it a little or left out certain details to make yourself not seem as bad? Probably. People do this all the time. When arguing for their position, for instance, they will almost certainly ONLY present material/evidence that is favorable to their view, and completely EXCLUDE material/evidence that undermines their view. So, when examining important issues, it is important to question things when people present their beliefs to you.

(4) Deal civilly with others: When debating someone else, avoid name-calling and anger. Avoid telling them that they are irrational or ignorant, and instead simply present the facts in a calm manner. Being rude to someone is a sure-fire way to get them to permanently disagree with you (and also not like you). A good first step toward resolving an important issue with someone who disagrees might be to figure out what SORTS of facts would need to be established in order to support a conclusion. Then attempt to discover those facts together. This will help you both to more easily reach a rational conclusion.

(5) Study philosophy: Finally, in order to think more clearly, reason more carefully, and better understand why you believe what you believe, and how to defend your beliefs against others, you ought to study philosophy. And lucky you! You’re studying it right now!