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The Enigma Of Reason



Synopsis

Reason, we are told, is what makes us human, the source of our knowledge and wisdom. If reason is so useful, why didn't it also evolve in other animals? If reason is that reliable, why do we produce so much thoroughly reasoned nonsense? In their groundbreaking account of the evolution and workings of reason, Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber set out to solve this double enigma.

Reason, they argue with a compelling mix of real-life and experimental evidence, is not geared to solitary use, to arriving at better beliefs and decisions on our own. What reason does, rather, is help us justify our beliefs and actions to others, convince them through argumentation, and evaluate the justifications and arguments that others address to us. In other words, reason helps humans better exploit their uniquely rich social environment. This interactionist interpretation explains why reason may have evolved and how it fits with other cognitive mechanisms. It makes sense of strengths and weaknesses that have long puzzled philosophers and psychologists—why reason is biased in favor of what we already believe, why it may lead to terrible ideas and yet is indispensable to spreading good ones. Ambitious, provocative, and entertaining, *The Enigma of Reason* will spark debate among psychologists and philosophers, and make many reasonable people rethink their own thinking.

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Customer Reviews

As evolutionary psychologists, Mercier and Sperber ask what might have been adaptive for our ancestors and thus built into our brains. Some have argued for modules specialized for reasoning

about particular topics. But Mercier and Sperber argue for a single module that can frame an argument and its conclusion: the former aids cooperation and the latter communication. So, the ultimate goal of reasoning is persuasion. It's an extraordinarily ambitious theory presented with brilliant insights, profound scholarship, and entertaining anecdotes. (Philip Johnson-Laird, Princeton University) This is a terrific book. The best thing I have read about human reasoning. It is extremely well written, interesting, and very enjoyable to read. (Gilbert Harman, Princeton University) Original, persuasive, and deftly argued, *The Enigma of Reason* puts forward a new and rather surprising thesis that the proper (evolutionary) functioning of reasoning is to persuade others via argumentation. This book will challenge your preconceptions about the mind's internal logic and why it exists. A compelling read and a novel contribution to the literature on reasoning. (Clark Barrett, University of California, Los Angeles)

Hugo Mercier is a researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research, working in the Cognitive Science Institute Marc Jeannerod in Lyon. Dan Sperber is a researcher in the Departments of Cognitive Science and of Philosophy at the Central European University, Budapest, and in the Institut Jean Nicod at the École Normale Supérieure, Paris.

I loved this book for a number of reasons. It's generally easy to read, though not too easy. (In fact, it can get very technical.) It's packed with examples of intriguing experiments and case studies, and it's extremely well-researched. It can also be very funny, which is nice when a text is long. But most of all I loved this book because it offers a persuasive, thought-provoking and highly relevant argument (here we go...) for why we continue to persist in beliefs that are, quite literally, unreasonable. The authors' approach taken to reason is called "interactionist", which basically says, "the normal conditions for the use of reasons are social, and more specifically dialogic. Outside of this environment, there is no guarantee that reasoning acts for the benefits of the reasoner. It might lead to distortions and poor decisions" (247). Just like "if your pen doesn't work upside down," or "if your car doesn't start with an empty tank, it is not because they are out of order but because they are not designed to function in such conditions." Not only that, but the authors convincingly establish that "two major features of the production of reason" are that it is both biased and lazy. So not only is our production of reasons plagued by these two features, but reason itself may be designed to work in certain environments. As I mentioned above, the authors provide scores of great examples. A couple that I found very interesting were their studies of the brilliant Alphonse Bertillon and arguably more brilliant Thomas Jefferson, both fascinating and consequential demonstrations of

"the use of reasoning to defend preexisting beliefs" (241), warning us that "reasoning can lead everyone on the wrong track" and even to "an unyielding scaffolding of reasons" (242). The more reasons, the more confidence, and so on. Brilliant as Jefferson was, when he "reflects on what is to be done about slavery, he has no trouble finding reasons to oppose emancipation" (303). Regarding recent popular movements, I very much appreciated the statement: "Few conspiracy theorists suffer from psychosis or cognitive impairment." Rather: ""Starting with a mistake, a remorseless logician can end up in bedlam."" "Doubt escalates, alternative answers are found, and pointed questions turn into full-blown paranoia." Finally, I very much enjoyed the authors' last chapter on Solitary Genius. It's interesting on its own, but also tremendously reinforces the interactionist argument, that dialog (regular, informed, educated, thorough, etc.) is absolutely critical to the best reasoning.

In my opinion, this is a very important book. Though I am now retired, in my career as an engineer I spent many years engaged in risk assessment and decision making. I have been through Stanford's "Strategic Decision Group" training, as well as numerous qualitative and quantitative risk assessment training courses. I spent decades developing and applying these skills, and my most profound realization was that people are ill equipped to make good (objectively justified) decisions about complex issues in the modern world. I became an amateur student of psychology, reading broadly in behavioral economics, evolutionary psychology, developmental psychology and their practical application (sales, decision making, etc.). I am an engineer, not a researcher. I apply models, or metamodels, to achieve an end. We engineers have a saying: all models are wrong, some models are useful - within limits. Until this book revealed its interactionist model of reasoning, I've been very limited in application of what I've learned about reasoning. I've been using tools that work (mostly), but why they work has been a mystery. Until now. The interactionist model of reasoning appears to integrate a suite of tools for application in the real (non-academic) world. This could have huge impact if additional research confirms the remaining areas of uncertainty. Now for the bad news. I think this book is a tough read. For a popular audience, the writing is good, but not brilliant, tending to the verbose. Even as fast as I read, I often had to flip back a few pages to re-establish context before proceeding. I would have been greatly aided by some diagrams to indicate relationship between concepts, rather than a thousand words describing the relationship. Coming from the practical side of the world, a list at the beginning or end of each chapter summarizing the key points would have been fantastic. The focus of the book is on a new model for reasoning so if you have read previous popular books on the subject you will recognize much of the material from other books as the authors build their case from the ground up. The concluding

chapter of the book is a nice change of pace, as it cleanly summarizes the main points in just a few pages. In short, if you are a student of human nature, you need to read this book. Don't give up, even when the going gets tough. I predict the model will eventually see broad application in practical decision making, and it certainly gives you a different perspective on your daily social interactions.

This is ground-breaking, readable, plausible, and if you are persuaded, as you may well be, your view of people and their minds, and the reasons they have and use, will be fundamentally altered. This book calls into question thousands of years of thinking about reason, reasons, and reasoning - from Aristotle to Kahneman and in between. Just stunning - approachably and entertainingly written - this will be a milestone and have influence beyond the field of evolutionary psychology. Anyone with enough interest in these kinds of topics to be reading this review will want to read it.

Psychology has made far less progress in understanding what reasoning is and how it occurs than in many other areas such as infant cognition in the last 50 years. The authors of this book seek to answer why only humans have the level of reasoning that we do compared to other animals and why our reasoning can be so highly flawed. They disagree with the two system theory (intuition system 1 and reasoning system 2) as presented in Daniel Kahneman's book "Thinking Fast and Slow". They approach the concept of reasoning thru a perspective of evolutionary psychology and appears to this layman as being convincing that they are on the right track. This book covers a lot of ground for those with little or no psychology background in order to build their case in a solid manner. Their theory that reasoning came about because of the need to interact in a convincing way with non-kin including believing it ourselves does appear to answer the two questions that have long been a puzzle. Highly recommended.

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