

Paradoxes of Irrationality

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We all know that we're less than perfectly rational. We have good reasons for this belief, learning about the imperfections of human rationality in areas such as probabilistic judgment, deductive inference, consistency checks and judgments about ourselves and others. In many cases, our knowledge is even more precise: we can have evidence - direct and indirect - that we are particularly bad reasoners in some areas but not others, that we are biased or prejudiced with respect to some subjects, or in some situations but not others, etc.

It is less clear, however, how we should deal with such knowledge. An extreme position would admonish us to distrust and discount our judgments if and when we have reason to believe them to be less than fully rational. Irrational judgments, however, can have consequences, and it sometimes seems rational to take them into account.

Our imperfection raises interesting questions: how should I rationally react to the discovery, e.g., that I will never be able to liberate myself fully of a particular prejudice which I nevertheless perceive and acknowledge as such? Could it be rational to "take it into account" in my theoretical and practical reasoning? But what does that mean? Should I blindly follow any prejudice I cannot get rid of? Surely not. But then by what criterion should we distinguish between forms of irrationality which rationality demands to ignore and those it asks us to take into account?