

## Class 9 - Cognitive Biases

### I. And Now for Something Completely Different

We have been looking at the ways in which science depends on our apprehension of particular evidential claims.

Some of those particular claims are observational.

Some of them are intuitive.

All of them seem to get some portion of their content from broader, general theories.

In science, in ethics, in linguistics, we rely on reflective equilibrium to generate our best theories.

As we will see in greater detail in part three of the course, and as we already saw at the very beginning, the methods of philosophy generally depend on both reflective equilibrium and the evidence of our intuitions.

So, if our philosophical theories are going to be true, or if even they are only going to warrant assertion, then our abilities to construct theories and apprehend intuitive evidence had better be pretty reliable.

We are going to look at two kinds of evidence against the reliability of human cognitive processes.

Now, in part two of the course, we will look at some general concerns about our inferential practices.

There has been an explosion of work in psychology and economics on what is often characterized as human irrationality.

Recently, popular psychological books on irrationality are legion.

See the McNerney bibliography.

And they keep coming!

Much of this work traces to research from Kahneman and Tversky and from Nisbett and Ross.

After our brief exploration of general human cognitive biases, we will turn to specific worries about intuitions in philosophy in part three of the course.

The unreliability of intuition is the motivation for much of the experimental philosophy movement.

### II. Eight Kinds of Fallacies

My goal for today's class is to get some data about cognitive biases on the table.

Much of this data is psychological or behavioral economical, which means that it is fairly easy to digest.

We will look at a bunch of often-amusing examples of how we reason poorly.

Let the idiotfest begin!

I've followed Kahneman and Tversky and McNerney to divide the fallacies (or cognitive biases) into eight overlapping categories.

- Representativeness
- Availability
- Adjustment and Anchoring
- Cognitive Biases
- Emotion and Reason
- Intuitions

Positive Psychology  
Mistakes We Make

In each of these categories, researchers have found biases by examining subjects' responses to particular cases.

Today, we're mostly just running through these cases and discussing them a little.

### III. Are We Irrational?

It is clear from the cases that we often make fallacious inferences.

Some people have concluded from the preponderance of evidence that humans are fundamentally irrational.

Are we irrational?

I want to make two observations.

1. Kahneman and Tversky present the cognitive biases they do as byproducts of generally-useful, generally-reliable heuristics.
2. Even to call an inference fallacious requires a background understanding of proper inferential practice. The very idea that we are fundamentally irrational seems to be a conceptual impossibility.