



How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life

By Thomas Gilovich

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Thomas Gilovich offers a wise and readable guide to the fallacy of the obvious in everyday life.

When can we trust what we believe—that "teams and players have winning streaks," that "flattery works," or that "the more people who agree, the more likely they are to be right"—and when are such beliefs suspect? Thomas Gilovich offers a guide to the fallacy of the obvious in everyday life. Illustrating his points with examples, and supporting them with the latest research findings, he documents the cognitive, social, and motivational processes that distort our thoughts, beliefs, judgments and decisions. In a rapidly changing world, the biases and stereotypes that help us process an overload of complex information inevitably distort what we would like to believe is reality. Awareness of our propensity to make these systematic errors, Gilovich argues, is the first step to more effective analysis and action.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #52540 in Books
- Brand: imusti
- Published on: 1993-03-05
- Released on: 1993-03-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.25" h x .60" w x 6.12" l, .56 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 224 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Sports fans who think that basketball players shoot in "hot streaks," and maternity nurses who maintain that more babies are born when the moon is full adhere to erroneous beliefs, according to Gilovich, associate professor of psychology at Cornell. With examples ranging from the spread of AIDS to the weight of Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, he skewers popular but mistaken assumptions. Faulty reasoning from incomplete or ambiguous data, a tendency to seek out "hypothesis-confirming evidence" and the habit of self-serving belief are among the factors Gilovich pinpoints in his sophisticated analysis. However, in the book's second half, his debunking of holistic medicine, ESP and paranormal phenomena is superficial and one-sided, marred by some of the very tendencies he effectively exposes in the "true believers."

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From Kirkus Reviews

The subtexts of this first-class critique of human (non)reason are that we all tell ourselves lies (at least some of the time)...that if you want to believe it's true, it is (faith healing, ESP)...that humans can't help seeing patterns where none exist (in clouds, in disastrous events, in gamblers' streaks). Furthermore, if you would like to learn more about how not to deceive yourself, you might take a course in one of the ``soft'' probabilistic sciences like psychology. This might be construed as self-serving, since Gilovich happens to teach psychology at Cornell. However, the point is well taken because such courses should expose students to a minimum of statistics--such as the law of regression, which says that when two variables are partially related, extremes in one variable are matched, on average, by less extreme variables in the other. (Children of tall parents are tall, but not as tall as their parents.) Gilovich attributes the general lack of appreciation of the law to ``the compelling nature of judgment by representation''--by which the predicted outcome should be as close to the data as possible: the son of a 6'5" dad should be close to 6'5". Gilovich also points to other pitfalls in reasoning, such as failure to record negative outcomes (how many times do you dream of an old friend and not bump into him the next day?). And he discusses deeper motives--e.g., fear of dying, prospects of power or immortality, and similar self-aggrandizing traits that fortify superstitions and the will to believe. Altogether, a satisfying splash of skepticism and reason in a world where the Lake Wobegon phenomenon--"the women are strong, the men are good-looking and all the children are above average"--prevails. --

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About the Author

Thomas Gilovich is a professor of psychology at Cornell University and author of *The Wisest One in the Room* (with Lee Ross), *How We Know What Isn't So*, *Why Smart People Make Big Money Mistakes*, and *Social Psychology*. He lives in Ithaca, New York.

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