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Emotions continually affect our thought processes and decisions, and much of the time we’re not even aware of or paying attention to them. Our emotions either drive us to something desirable or pleasurable, or guide us to avoid something painful. As a result, we may believe we are looking for the truth, or being realistic, when in fact we are holding on to ideas that bring a release from tension and soothe our egos--mainly to feel superior or correct. And this is how we become biased.

Some people will claim they are immune to bias, mainly because they are trapped in their own pleasure and ego. Over time, though, these kinds of people either become irritatingly stubborn or they become irrational to the point of ridiculousness. But there is hope! If someone can recognize their biases, they can strive to control their emotions in regard to them. When it comes to biases, it is best to search and see how they continually operate inside you, as well as learn how to identify such irrationality in others.

Confirmation Bias. It’s not uncommon for people to “find” evidence that confirms what they “want” to believe. A few Google searches will land you on the evidence you desire. We even see this when people ask for advice--many just want to hear confirmation of their own viewpoint. Even in consulting, when someone asks me for advice about a leadership decision they’re about to make, they’re expecting me to point them in the direction they want to go. They get frustrated when I don’t confirm their own ideas and preferences.

To overcome confirmation bias, examine the evidence yourself in the cold light of day, with as much skepticism as you can muster. Your first impulse should always be to find the evidence that disconfirms your most cherished beliefs and those of others.

Conviction Bias. Some people think if they believe in something so strongly, it must be true. How many times have you listened to someone express an opinion with heated words and gestures, colorful metaphors and entertaining anecdotes, with lots of conviction, and think to yourself that they must have carefully and thoroughly examined the idea in order to express it with such certainty? What they’re proclaiming

may indeed be true, but then again, maybe not. Don’t automatically assume it is because of a dramatic presentation.

Appearance Bias. We often see people not as they are, but as they appear to us. And these appearances are usually misleading.

First, people have trained themselves in social situations to present the front that is appropriate and that will be judged positively. They seem to be in favor of the noblest causes, always presenting themselves as hardworking and conscientious. We perceive these masks as their reality.

Second, we are prone to fall for the halo effect--when we see a certain negative or positive quality in a person (such as social awkwardness or intelligence) then imply that other positive or negative qualities fit with it. For instance, if someone is successful, we may imagine they are probably also ethical, conscientious, and deserving of their good fortune. However, this could obscure the fact that they got ahead by less-than-moral actions, which they cleverly disguised from view. I personally know someone who lied about having a required college degree and years of leadership experience to fool a reputable company into hiring him into a high-paying managerial position. So don’t let someone’s “song and dance” and/or a piece of paper fully convince you. Always exercise due diligence.

Group Bias. We are social animals by nature. The feeling of isolation or being different from everyone else in a group setting can be depressing and/or terrifying. When we do find others who have similar ideas and opinions as we do, we can often experience tremendous relief and motivation.

Sometimes we’re unaware of this pull on us, thinking we’ve arrived at ideas on our own. Look at people who support one political party or the other. One ideology (noticeable orthodoxy of correctness) prevails, without anyone saying anything or applying overt pressure. Opinions of people on the right or left will almost always follow the same direction on dozens of issues, as if by magic, and yet few would ever admit this influence on their thought patterns. To get past this bias, always remind yourself it is okay to have opinions and beliefs that are different from the group.

Blame Bias. We all have an inclination to place blame when

things go wrong. Even when we blame ourselves, we do so more as an effort to accept responsibility. We’ll take the bullet to protect our people. And even if we are truly to blame, our introspection is often limited because it can be painful. Our natural and hidden response is to still project the blame. We don’t like disrupting our feelings of superiority. And we certainly don’t like poking at our ego. Nonetheless, we’ll go through the motions, pretending to reflect on what we did. But with the passage of time, our pleasure emotion comes back and we forget about what small part in the mistake we ascribed to ourselves. Desire and emotion will most likely blind us yet again, and we’ll repeat exactly the same mistake and go through the same mild recriminating process, followed by forgetfulness, until we die. Think about it: if people truly learned from their experiences, we would find few mistakes in the world and career paths that would ascend ever upward.

Superiority Bias. “I’m different. I’m more rational than others, and more ethical as well.” Few would say this to people in a conversation. It sounds arrogant. But in numerous opinion polls and studies, when asked to compare themselves with others, people generally express a variation of this. It’s the equivalent of an optical illusion --we cannot seem to see our faults and irrationalities, only those of others. We feel compelled to imagine ourselves as rational, decent, and ethical. These are qualities highly promoted in our culture. To show signs otherwise is to risk great disapproval.

If all of this were true--if people were rational and morally superior--the world would be suffused with goodness and peace. We know, however, the reality, and some people, perhaps all of us, are merely deceiving ourselves. Rationality and ethical qualities must be achieved through awareness and effort. They do not come naturally. They come through a maturation process.

Understanding biases is important when interacting with and leading people. Keeping a balanced perspective will immensely aid you in controlling your emotions in given situations. And the more you can control your emotions, the more effective you can be in the majority of life’s challenging scenarios.

~ The End ~