

Motivated Reasoning:

THE USE OF REASONING TO JUSTIFY SELF-SERVING DECISIONS

What It Is

When we make decisions, we like to think we operate like a judge who carefully evaluates all the facts and arrives at a well-reasoned judgment. In fact, we're much more like a lawyer who advocates for a particular outcome. We tend to use reasoning not to discover what's really true but to justify—both to ourselves and to others—the conclusion we prefer, or have already made. This is called motivated reasoning, and it is one of the most important topics for behavioral science to explain.

Emotions and intuitions are nearly automatic responses, but reasoning operates much more slowly. Before we can use reasoning to make a decision, our emotional or intuitive response generates a preference. This preference leads us to process subsequent information with the motivation to reach our desired conclusion. For example, we tend to trust the validity of intelligence tests that affirm that we are smart while we mistrust those that tell us we are not as intelligent as we thought. We will try harder to reach the conclusion we already prefer, and we tend to ignore information that is inconsistent with it.

Because this process occurs subconsciously, we maintain the belief that we reasoned objectively and came to the conclusion rationally and honestly when in fact we used reason only to construct justifications to satisfy ourselves and others.

Why It Matters

Motivated reasoning affects decision-making in all areas of our lives, but moral decisions are especially vulnerable. Moral decisions are often high-stakes decisions. They also tend to be especially complex, emotional, and intuitive. These characteristics provide the ideal conditions for motivated reasoning to take effect.

Incentive pay is one common way motivated reasoning enters into business decisions. Researchers have found, for example, that when CEOs receive a large portion of their pay as stock, product safety problems and product recalls tend to become more common. This is not because CEOs consciously choose to create unsafe products and put consumers in harm's way. Rather, they rationalize risky decisions that raise the price of the company stock in the short-term but may cause long-term reputational damage.

We can never get rid of motivated reasoning completely. But we can shape our expectations and our environments so that motivated reasoning does not harm others by going unchecked.

What To Do

USE THE "FRONT PAGE" TEST

Studies have shown that when we expect our decisions to be made public we are more circumspect. Ask yourself, "Would I be comfortable having this choice published on the front page of a local newspaper?" This provides an opportunity to step back from the conditions that may induce motivated reasoning and engage in more critical thinking.

DON'T GO IT ALONE

Motivated reasoning can lead us to ignore information that challenges our desired outcome. While it is difficult to notice motivated reasoning in ourselves, we can much more easily recognize it in others. Surround yourself with the voices of those you trust, and make sure you're prepared to listen and acknowledge your limitations. You can even make it someone's job to voice dissent. If you're surrounded only by "yes men" it can be all too easy for motivated reasoning to take over.

AVOID AMBIGUITY

Motivated reasoning becomes more likely when the rules are fuzzy or vague. Rely on general, accepted standards whenever possible, and make rules clear enough so that it is not possible to define the same act in two different ways.

Where To Go Next



Ditto, P. H., Pizarro, D. A., & Tannenbaum, D. (2009). Motivated moral reasoning. *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, 50, 307-338.

Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480.

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