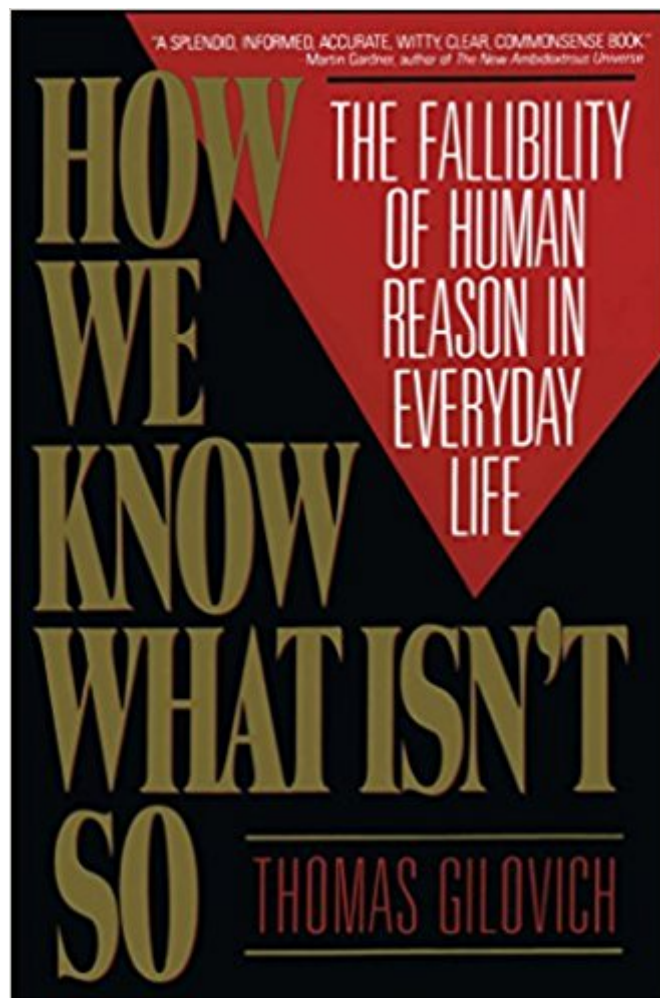




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# How We Know What Isn't So: The Fallibility Of Human Reason In Everyday Life



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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." Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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. -- Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book had me from the very first sentence. "It is widely believed that infertile couples who adopt a child are subsequently more likely to conceive than similar couples who do not." That was certainly my belief, founded on one part personal acquaintance with such couples and one part confirmation from everyone I've ever discussed this with. Yet, it just isn't so. This book is all about the pitfalls of fallacious thinking. Many of us like to think we're immune to such fallacies but this book will demonstrate that virtually everyone is subject to them. I decided to check the book out after hearing it highly recommended by Dr. Steven Novella on the Skeptics Guide to the universe podcast. I expected the book to be of more recent vintage but in fact it dates from 1991. That

explains the frequency of AIDS related examples in the book. But the book is not as dated as the twenty odd years since its publication would suggest. Doubtless more contemporary examples would have been nice but the underlying principles are as sound as ever and the need for critical thinking as important as well. In books such as these where the author is spending a lot of time pointing out popular foibles and errors I try to read between the lines and see if I can detect if an author has his own blind spots. In some like Sagan's excellent "Demon Haunted World" and Dawkin's equally excellent "God Delusion" one does detect places where sound principles are giving way to personal convictions. The present book is largely free from that; the author chooses examples equally from across political and economic spectra. He seems to be going out of his way to fair and objective. I purchased the Kindle edition. The book is quite readable but not completely up to the latest Kindle standards. There is no Table of Contents in the menu although there is a linked Table of Contents at the beginning. The progress bar only marks out the Parts of which there are only four. Each Chapter (eleven total) should have been marked on the bar. The index is not linked; it just mirrors the print edition. There are a few tables which might be hard to decipher at font sizes higher than the smallest. On the plus side the chapter reference notes and footnotes are linked. Highly recommended. The book is an enjoyable read because the author has a very conversational style which places the reader at ease.

Can't recommend this book enough - not only it explains a lot of things in every day behavior of you and me, it gives a lot of advice and insight, all backed by facts and examples, which you could take, repeat and verify.

Fascinating read, translated very cleanly into the Kindle format. A worthwhile buy.

Purchased the book for a class I was taking online and read it over a period of about two months as I took the class. Written in the 80s so a great deal of it is terribly outdated but the fundamental information supplied is still valuable if you want some insight on how people think...or don't think. How people see patterns where there are none. Why people believe something when all the evidence points to the contrary (in this day and age, think climate control) and why we believe the unbelievable.

Gilovich presents common mistakes of human reasoning in an easy way to understand with great examples. Be ready to have your assumptions challenged and open your mind to your mistakes.

Excellent and fun read. I think it is essential to know and understand cognitive biases. Gilovich does a great job reviewing them and presenting them in a readable manner.

Mr. Gilovich's short volume is an accessible and fast paced tour through the cognitive, motivational, and social determinants of our sometimes "questionable" beliefs. The first two parts of this four part book are by far and away the most interesting, (the third parts deals with ESP and alternative health benefits, and I'm sure would be interesting to those so inclined). For me, the chapters on how we misrepresent data and our expectation were both surprising and a confirmation of other reading/research I've done on this topic. If you're looking for a book that will provide a different, and scholarly account of the fallibility of human reason, this is the book. Very well done and recommended.

This is a fascinating discourse on the pitfalls of human reasoning. Gilovich covers everything from the counter-intuitiveness of many facts governing probability, to the effects of absent data, to debunking often reported stories of older research, such as the case of "Little Albert," a toddler who was made to be afraid of white rats, by pairing any contact with white rats with an unpleasant stimulus. Gilovich has personally conducted numerous research trials exploring the ways people learn and reason, and draws on this background, as well as a thorough command of other research into relevant areas. In one experiment, students were asked to guess their class rankings in regard to leadership abilities: only 2% thought they were below average, while a full 60% thought they were in the top 10%! Gilovich has a very smooth writing style, and he is writing here for laymen. In spite of the huge amount of valuable information presented, the 215 page book is easy-going, and I think most people would finish it in a few days. This is a book you will refer back to time and again, so buying a personal copy is a good idea.

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