

HOW
TO
THINK

A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR
A WORLD AT ODDS

ALAN JACOBS



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*To the students and faculty
of the Honors College at Baylor University*

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INTRODUCTION

Why we're worse at thinking than we think

"What were you *thinking*?" It's a question we ask when we find someone's behavior inexplicable, when we can't imagine what chain of reasoning could possibly lead to what they just said, or did. But even when we're not at the point of exasperation, we can still find ourselves wondering where our friends and family and neighbors got such peculiar ideas. And it might even happen, from time to time, in the rare quiet hours of our lives, that we ask how we got our own ideas—why we think the way we do.

Such matters strike me as both interesting and important: given the questions that constantly confront us as persons and societies, about health and illness, justice and injustice, sexuality and religion, wouldn't we all benefit from a better understanding of what it means to think well? So in the past few years I've read many books about thinking, and while they offer varying and in some cases radically incompatible models of what

thinking is, there's one trait all of them share: they're *really* depressing to read.

They're depressing because even when they don't agree on anything else, they provide an astonishingly detailed and wide-ranging litany of the ways that thinking goes astray—the infinitely varied paths we can take toward the seemingly inevitable dead end of Getting It Wrong. And these paths to error have names! Anchoring, availability cascades, confirmation bias, the Dunning-Kruger effect, the endowment effect, framing effects, group attribution errors, halo effects, ingroup and outgroup homogeneity biases, recency illusions . . . that's a small selection, but even so: what a list. What a chronicle of ineptitude, arrogance, sheer dumbassery. So much gone wrong, in so many ways, with such devastating consequences for selves and societies. Still worse, those who believe that they are impeccably thoughtful turn out to be some of the worst offenders against good sense.*

So surely, I think as I pore over these books, it's vital for me (for all of us) to get a firm grip on good thinking and bad, reason and error—to shun the Wrong and embrace the Right. But given that there appear to be as

* Some of the books that chronicle these errors will be referred to throughout this book. The most important one is Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). I will also cite Jonathan Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (Basic Books, 2005) and *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012). Also useful is Dan Ariely's *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (HarperCollins, 2008; 2nd ed., 2012). But you can also take a shortcut to thoroughgoing despair simply by reading the Wikipedia page called "List of Cognitive Biases."

many kinds of mental error as stars in the sky, the investigation makes me dizzy. After a while I find myself asking: What are these people even talking about? What, at bottom, *is* thinking?

THINKING IN ACTION: AN EXAMPLE

Imagine that you and your partner are buying a car. You're not a pure impulse buyer, so you're not going to choose on appearance alone (unless, of course, a car is so hideously ugly that you'd be ashamed to be seen in it). You know that there are many factors to keep in mind, and you try to remember what they all are—gas mileage, reliability, comfort, storage space, seating, sound system. Do we need extra features, like a GPS?, you might ask. How much more would it cost to have that installed?

A checklist helps, but it's not going to tell you which items on the list should have greater priority and which less. Maybe you'd say in general that comfort is more important than gas mileage, but what if the car's an absolute guzzler? That could be a deal breaker.

Anyway, here you are at the used car lot. This blue Toyota looks nice, and the reviews on the major websites are positive. You look it over, you sit in it and consult your lumbar region: Everything feel pretty good down there? You take it for a test drive and it seems to you that the ride is a little rough, though it could be that you're paying *too much* attention and have made yourself oversensitive, like the princess in "The Princess and the Pea." You try to factor in that possibility.

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You go through this ritual three or four times and then you make your decision, which you're relatively pleased with until you get home and your partner comments that the *obviously* best choice would have been the one you ruled out at the beginning because you thought it looked hideous, at which point you reflect that maybe you shouldn't have tried to make this decision on your own.

This is what thinking is: not the decision itself but what goes into the decision, the consideration, the assessment. It's testing your own responses and weighing the available evidence; it's grasping, as best you can and with all available and relevant senses, what *is*, and it's also speculating, as carefully and responsibly as you can, about what *might be*. And it's knowing when not to go it alone, and whom you should ask for help.

The uncertainties that necessarily accompany predicting the future—not only do you not know what will happen but you don't even know how you'll *feel* about what happens, whether you'll eventually stop noticing that uncomfortable seat or will want to drive the car off a cliff because of it—mean that thinking will always be an art rather than a science. (Science can help, though; science is our friend.)

My father had an almost unerring ability to buy bad cars, for a simple reason: He never actually thought about it. He acted always on impulse and instinct, and his impulses and instincts, like mine and yours, weren't very reliable. But he *liked* acting impulsively, and I believe he would rather have owned a lousy car than devoted research and planning to the task of purchasing one. (Verily, he had his reward.) But I was always