THE SOURCE OF BIAS

There are biases in our thinking that can lead to big mistakes in our decision making, including expensive mistakes with our money and investments, poor choices at work, and huge misunderstandings between people.

In the past I've written about Daniel Kahneman's description of fast and slow thinking as a way of understanding and minimizing the effects of these biases. Today I want to talk about why we have these biases in the first place.

Is it because we're flawed? Is there something wrong with us? Are we just a bunch of numbskulls that don't know how to use our brains?

No, that's not it. There's nothing wrong with us. Our biases are part of an effective and healthy

brain, and normal human functioning.

It’s more accurate to say that our lives involve challenges that can sometimes overwhelm what we’re capable of. And yet we still function exceptionally well, most of the time.

Put more directly, human beings are capable of conscious thought, future planning, and agency, in a way that no other creature on earth is capable of.

We also have what’s called a “theory of mind” – imagining what another human or animal is experiencing – in a way no other creature can. Chimpanzees are the only exception we’ve found so far, but their ability is very limited in comparison.

So you may imagine all kinds of things about the internal world of your beloved cat or dog, but they, meanwhile are *not* able to imagine your internal world. They connect with us by tracking our observable behavior; and they do pretty well with that. But it’s nothing like the kind of empathy we have.

With the media, politicians, and the general tone of public discourse, much of what’s talked about is how bad human beings are.

Why are we so violent, uncaring, self-centered, and ignorant. But a little neurological understanding throws that question on its head.

What’s truly remarkable is how we can be so compassionate, caring, empathetic, and capable of the most brilliant and self-reflective thought.

Our internal worlds involve a tremendous amount of thinking about others, worrying about others, caring about others, fretting about others, trying to understand others.

We also spend a tremendous amount of time reflecting on our own experience, our own feelings, and what we can learn and improve going toward the future.

This is not the world of any other creature on earth.

And it takes a lot of energy.

Our brains use about 25% of our metabolic energy – a fourth of the calories we eat fuels our brains alone.

The only way that we manage this kind of energy load is to keep a lot of things on automatic. Of course things like breathing, heartbeat, digestion, and other regular body functions go on, for the most part, all by themselves. But our habits and deeply ingrained movements like walking and scratching our heads all work best when we don't think too much about them.

(Try walking a few steps while consciously trying to deliberately monitor each tiny movement, and you'll quickly find yourself stuck in place – or flat on the floor)

What requires the most energy is our conscious thought – our executive function. And this is where the work of professor Roy Baumeister has been so important.

His research on *ego depletion* has been some of the most well replicated and supported research in the social sciences.

What he found is that when we are engaged in conscious decision making – the kind of slow thinking that Kahneman has written about – the metabolic energy in our brain gets depleted.

And over time as this energy continues to be depleted, we get to the point where such conscious decision making becomes markedly less effective.

In a way, it's like how a muscle works. The more we use a muscle, the more fatigued it gets, until at some point we have to rest.

On the other hand, the more we exercise regularly, the stronger our muscles become and the more endurance we gain. Our brains work like that, too.

The more we practice using our conscious thinking, the more we deliberately grow our willpower and executive function, the more resources we build for those very abilities.

This is why it can help to become aware of our biases, and work to master them when we need to.

But no matter how athletic our powers of conscious thought, it still always uses a tremendous amount of metabolic energy.

Now we come to the source of our biases: we have biases toward the status quo; we have biases

toward what we regularly are exposed to; we have biases away from what we might regret; we have biases for all these and more…Because they usually work pretty well in our day to day lives, and they take much less energy to use.

That's it.

We have biases because they're mostly useful, and they save us a tremendous amount of energy. Even though they can sometimes cost us a fortune.

Now, in the modern world, what's a little more energy? We can easily cut out some mundane, unproductive activity and buy a bit more energy, right?

But for our ancestors, who regularly had to deal with famine, and daily had to search or hunt for food, a little energy could mean the difference between life and death.

And this is why our biases are so strong. Our automatic processes, and our automatic thinking are working hard to keep us alive.

They're useful shortcuts, that work well most of the time.

The problem is, our modern world requires a degree of deliberate, conscious thought that our ancestors could never have imagined. That's why we even know we have biases! Because they show themselves to us when we misjudge an investment, or follow our gut without having earned the experience and working memory required to actually *trust* our gut.

Understanding our biases can help us adapt to the realities of our modern world. I encourage you to learn about them, pay attention to them, and master them as best as you can.

But you need never be ashamed of them, or wonder what's broken in us that they're so common.

Our biases, for the most part, allow us to live well, using a livable amount of metabolic energy. They are, almost always, our allies.

Except when they're not, and that's where the work is worth doing to master them.

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book, Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions. He is a marriage and family therapist and life coach who works with people around the world via phone and video. You can get a FREE 30-minute initial conversation with him if you sign up at his website, www.drjoelwade.com. Joel saved Jack's life in Tibet in 1987 by rescuing him off a collapsing cliff. They've been life-long friends ever since.