

Is Human Nature Irrational?

Many social psychologists who have studied the choices and behaviors of people have concluded that humans do not behave rationally. For example, Max Bazerman, in his book *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, cites numerous studies that show that humans rely on irrational beliefs and rules of thumb when making important decisions. For instance, people rely on a nonexistent “law of averages” that they believe influences the risks they take. People believe they can control purely chance events. People regularly underestimate the risk of dying in familiar but highly risky activities such as driving, smoking, or eating fried foods, and overestimate the risks of unlikely but memorable events such as dying in a tornado or being attacked by a grizzly bear in a national park. Robert Cialdini notes in his book *Influence* that he found people’s choices can be manipulated by appealing to six nonrational norms or rules that we generally follow:

Reciprocity. I should do this for you because you did something for me.

Commitment and Consistency. I should do this because it is consistent with something I already committed myself to doing.

Liking. I should do this because I know and like you.

Authority. I should do this because an authority says I should.

Scarcity. I should do this because there’s only a few chances left and I won’t get a chance later.

QUESTIONS

1. Suppose that the social psychologists are right in claiming that human beings behave irrationally. Does this show that human nature itself is not rational? Why or why not?
2. Can a psychological study of how people often—or even usually—behave disprove a philosophical theory of human nature? Why or why not?
3. Many advertisers, sellers, and promoters believe that Cialdini is right and that his theory provides the key for manipulating people into buying their products or doing what they want. Is there anything wrong with giving people the knowledge that will enable them to manipulate others?