

Book Review: Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe by Hugo Mercier

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Mercier, Hugo. *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe*. Princeton University Press, 2020. xix + 364 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Contrary to the historical view that humans are inherently gullible, *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe* proffers a divergent argument that asserts humans are endowed with cognitive mechanisms to evaluate communicated information. Basing his thesis on an evolutionary framework, Hugo Mercier, a cognitive scientist, argues “gullibility can be too easily taken advantage of, and thus isn’t adaptive” (p. 13). Throughout this book, Mercier relies on this evolutionary underpinning and also empirical evidence from experimental psychology to dispel the ostensibly ingrained notion of human credulity by introducing the concept of open vigilance mechanisms, detailing the functioning of these mechanisms, and drawing a discernible distinction between gullibility and adhering to misconceptions. Also, the use of historical and contemporary examples of such misconceptions advances the thesis and makes this book a compelling read.

The book starts by introducing open vigilance mechanisms, which comprise plausibility checking and reasoning. Plausibility checking evaluates whether to accept or reject messages based on our preexisting beliefs, while reasoning uses our preexisting inferential mechanisms to evaluate arguments, making us more open-minded and vigilant. To highlight the importance of these mechanisms, the book presents an analogy that relates the diets of animals with extremely specific food choices to those of omnivores, in that the openness and vigilance of omnivores makes them more adaptable to new environments. Similarly, whereas nonhuman primates rely on specific signals, human cognition is more sophisticated, which affords more opportunities via increased openness, but necessitates vigilance to potential dangers. The implication of this analogy is paramount, as it suggests that humans have “evolved from a situation of extreme

conservatism ... toward a situation in which we are more vigilant but also more open to different forms and contents of communication” (pp. 41, 42). Therefore, if our sophisticated cognitive mechanisms were disrupted, we would revert to a more conservative, not credulous, mindset.

The functioning of these mechanisms is explored next. First, the importance of our cognitive mechanisms in assessing plausibility is considered. Reasoning is deemed crucial, as it “helps us accept conclusions we never would have believed without argument” (p. 54). This allows us to form more accurate opinions and decisions. Determining who is competent is subsequently addressed, which draws on a variety of cues such as access to information, past performance, and majority opinion. Maintaining his evolutionary framework, Mercier claims that past performance is often a reliable, though not fail-safe, cue of competence, as this is hard or impossible to fake. The credibility of majority opinion is also restored, as Mercier deconstructs the conformity experiments of Asch and Milgram to highlight the limitations of their findings. The book suggests instead that when opinions are formed independently, “averaging across many opinions is nearly guaranteed to lower the resulting error” (p. 71). Also, open vigilance mechanisms are involved in deciding who to trust, particularly when the incentives of the sender of a message and the receiver diverge. In particular, diligent communication is crucial in establishing goodwill with potential cooperation partners, as this keeps the reputations of the interlocutors in check. Lastly, the concept of emotional contagion is introduced and replaced with a more logical notion of emotional vigilance, where people can “adjust their reactions to emotional signals so as to stop responses that aren’t in their best interest” (p. 102). Mercier later extends this concept by remarking on the heterogeneous behavior of people in crowds.

After exploring open vigilance mechanisms in the first several chapters, the rest of this book relates these mechanisms to the tendency to accept misconceptions. Using many examples

from historical and contemporary events, Mercier underscores the distinction between being gullible and adhering to beliefs that seem absurd by current or majority standards. One notable example is the prevalence of witchcraft beliefs across different cultures. While such a belief certainly appears implausible, it may “emerge from a cycle of suspicion, the need to mend fences, and false confessions” (p. 186). Similarly, the spread of inconceivable rumors is not a failure of our open vigilance mechanisms inasmuch as an opportunity to score social points among our peers by sharing tantalizing information. Mercier recruits these two examples to bolster his claim of intuitive versus reflective beliefs, where unlike the former, reflective beliefs are “insulated from cognitive or behavioral consequences,” and are attributed to the spread of disinformation (p. 152). A contemporary example in dispelling the notion of gullibility is the Nigerian email scam. By intentionally making the emails sound blatantly absurd, the scammers effectively weed out those who question it to mitigate the costs of perpetuating the scam. Mercier thus concludes by drawing a parallel between the adoption of misconceptions and the beliefs in widespread gullibility by claiming they are both largely reflective.

Overall, this book acts as an agent of its own thesis. By offering its readers an alternate view regarding gullibility, *Not Born Yesterday: The Science of Who We Trust and What We Believe* elicits our open vigilance mechanisms by employing refined arguments, credible sources, and salient examples to engender increased openness to the holistic argument against gullibility, while considering our natural propensity to be vigilant. This book effectively delineates the case against gullibility in a logical and intuitive manner, and is recommended for graduate students studying experimental psychology or cognitive science.

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