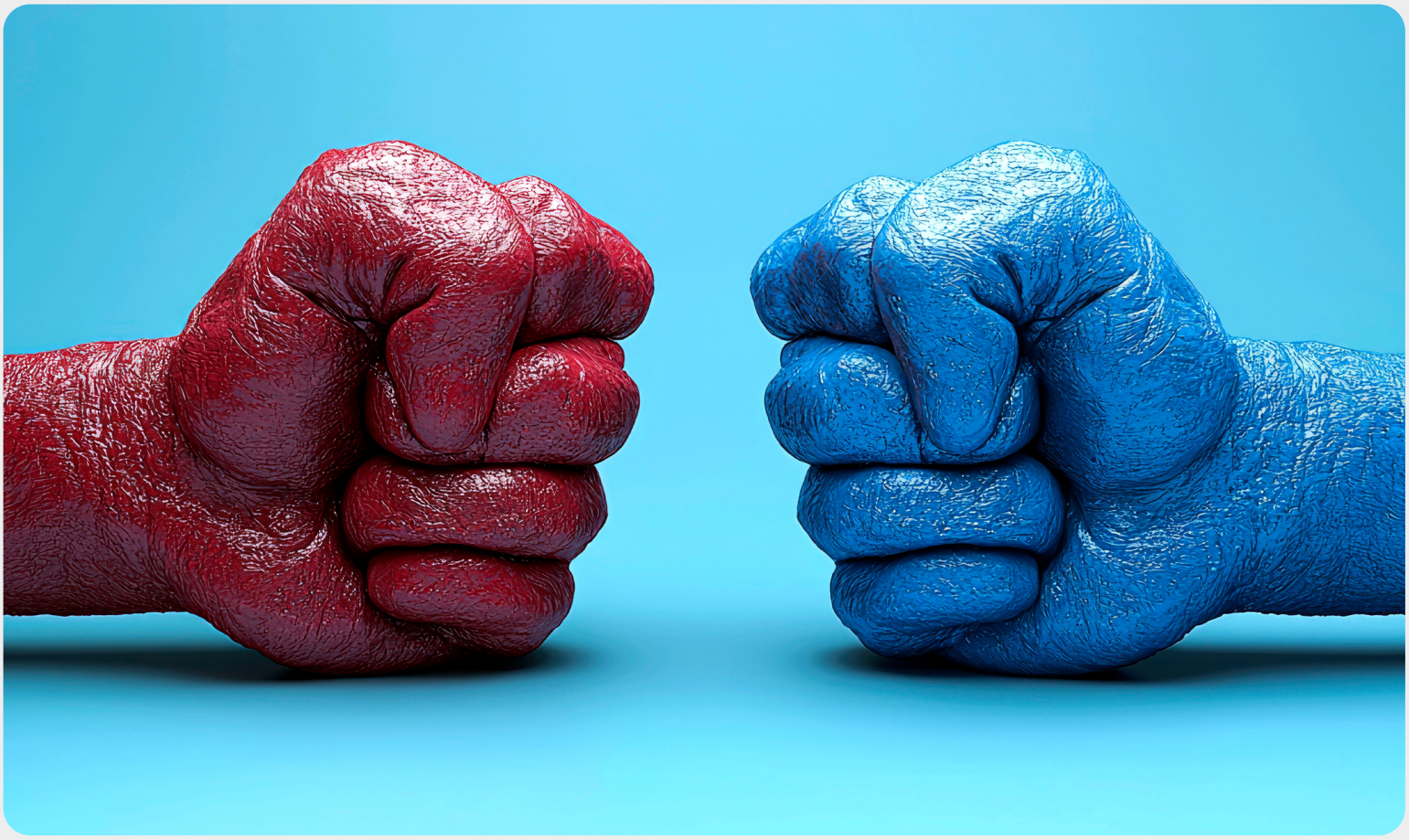
Myside Bias*

***bias**

a preference or inclination that is mostly unconscious.



an explainer from the oregon education project

Myside Bias

an explainer from the **oregon education** project



Learn to Think Critically About the World

The Bias That Divides Americans Today

One of the most important findings in cognitive psychology is that people evaluate, generate evidence, and test hypotheses in a manner *biased* toward their own *prior* beliefs, opinions, and attitudes. It's called Myside Bias because it's seen most readily in the tribal politics and cultural animosity that dominates American life today. It explains why we disagree about FACTS and have difficulty changing our minds.

As Keith Stanovich writes, in his ground-breaking book **The Bias That Divides Us**,

"We are not living in a Post-Truth Society [as many suggest]; we are living in a Myside Bias Society … The crux of our current societal dilemma over 'fake news' is not that we have come to *disregard* the truth or become cavalier toward it, but that we are *selective* in displaying our post-truth tendencies."[1]

In other words, we don't think that *all* the news we see in the media is fake news, only the news that comes from *those on the other side*. We believe in *our* truth, in *our* news. We do value facts — but only when they support *our team*.

This shows up in studies of human behavior done to understand how we think:

- People evaluate ambiguous acts [like political protests or sports refereeing] more favorably when they support their own group or team[2];
- People judge the same harm more harshly if it's done to their own side[3];
- People take more time reading and thinking about arguments when they contradicted their prior opinions — because they were *selectively generating refutations* of them (as opposed to thinking *critically* about them).[4]

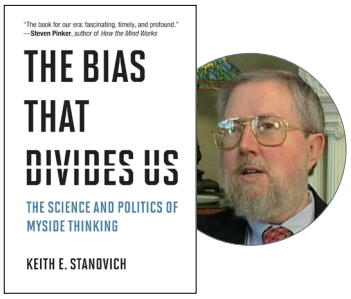
Perhaps most importantly, **Myside** Bias undermines our ability to evaluate the evidence produced by scientific studies.[5] We're **motivated reasoners**[6] by default. This explains why today's debates about science have become so *politicized* and *polarized*. Due to a lack of viewpoint diversity, a culture of "groupthink" dominates universities and research institutions. This reinforces *myside thinking* by stifling open inquiry and skepticism — which are essential components of successful science.

Myside Thinking doesn't just affect how we evaluate information, it's also how we generate arguments and provide evidence to make our case.[7] Stanovich writes:

"In several experiments, my research group had subjects explore arguments both for and against various public policy propositions (e.g., 'people should be allowed to sell their internal organs'; 'Tuition should be raised to cover the full cost of a university education'). When subjects had a strong opinion on the issue, they generated many more arguments for their side than for the opposite one. This was true even when they were given explicit instructions to be unbiased in their reasoning."[8]

You see this phenomenon throughout our news media today. Reliably Left-of-center outlets like NPR, NBC, CNN, CBS, and ABC report more negative information about Republicans. Reliably Right-of-center outlets like Fox News do the opposite. It drives the selection, framing, and anchoring of the news for a largely *partisan* audience.[9] Like all biases, this is mostly *unconscious*; it does not *require* deliberate effort.

Myside Bias is hard-wired into our thinking about the world. It's a feature, not a bug.



[1] **The Bias That Divides Us**: The Science and Politics of Myside Thinking by Keith Stanovich

[2] Kahan, Hoffman, Braman, Evans, and Rachlinski: "**They Saw the Protest**": Cogntive illberalism and speech-conduct distinction. *Stanford Law Review* (2012).

[3] Stanovich and West: On the relative independence of thinking biases and cognitive ability. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2008).

[4] Taber and Lodge: Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science* (2006).

[5] Lord, Ross, and Lepper: Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1979).

[6] We process information to suit a goal other than forming accurate beliefs — usually "to win".

It's opposite is **deliberative reasoning**: objective analysis and evaluation designed to form good judgment. [Critical Thinking]

[7] Perkins: Postprimary education has little impact on informal reasoning. *Journal of Educational Psychology* (1985).

[8] Toplak and Stanovich: Associations between myside bias on an informal reasoning task and amount of post-secondary education. *Applied Cognitive Psychology* (2003).

Macpherson and Stanovich: Cognitive ability, thinking dispositions, and instructional set as predictors of critical thinking. *Learning and Individual Differences* (2007).

[9] See Oregon Education Project Investigation **Technopoly**.

Stanovich's work is bolstered by studies in evolutionary psychology that seek to understand the *origins* of human reasoning and argumentation. Most notably, the work of Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber in their book **The Enigma of Reason**:

"Reasoning evolved to improve the ability of ancestral hunter-gatherers to co-operate in small groups [tribes] … What reason does … is help us *justify* our beliefs and actions to others … and evaluate the justifications and arguments that others address to us."[9]

From an evolutionary perspective, reasoning is about *being right with others in our social environment*.[10] Holding people accountable is essential for coöperation. There is an expectation that we will be called upon to *justify* our beliefs, feelings, or actions to others. The expectation is that people will reward or punish us based on how well we justify ourselves. This exchange of reasons is our default setting.

We like to be right. **And we don't like being wrong**. Studies show we avoid points of view that differ from our own to avoid the mental strain of cognitive dissonance.[11] Hence the ascent of niche media platforms catering to specific points of view. People on the Left go crazy listening to Fox News. People on the Right get angry listening to NPR — hence its defunding: NPR is a **Progressive**-Left media platform.[12]

The deeply *tribal* nature of today's politics is a catalyst for **Myside** Thinking. It makes us vulnerable to propaganda if we're not wise enough to think critically. It's bound to get much worse as artificial intelligence becomes an increasing player in the mix.

So how do we overcome **Myside Bias**?

DISCONFIRM: Anything that makes us more skeptical about our beliefs will tend to decrease Myside Bias. Question everything: practice the art of *disconfirmation*. Evaluate differing perspectives and demand evidence before adopting any belief.

DISENGAGE: When you treat your convictions less like possessions, you are less likely to project them onto new evidence inappropriately. Assume "the view from nowhere" and consciously set aside your beliefs. Be in "discovery mode" and avoid the tendency to actively rebut claims that contradict your assumptions.

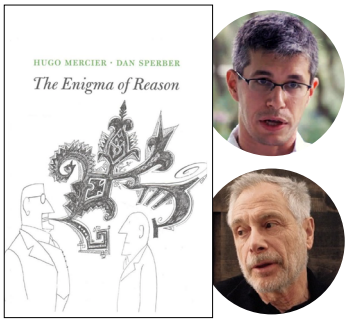
DISINHERIT: You will feel less like your convictions are your possessions as you realize you did not consciously reason your way to them. Much of what we believe is simply what we've heard repeatedly — without evidence. Think for yourself.

Above all practice **intellectual humility**: recognize the limits of your knowledge. As the eminent physicist and science educator Richard Feynman once put it,

"The first principle is that you must not fool *yourself* – and *you* are the easiest person to fool."

Evolutionary psychology is a scientific discipline that approaches human behavior, cognition, culture, and emotions through a lens that incorporates the effects of natural selection [evolution] over time. It combines psychology, neuroscience, biology, and anthropology.

See **The Adapted Mind** by Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby.



[9] **The Enigma of Reason** by Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber.

See also "What psychology experiments tell you about why people deny facts." *The Economist* (Dec 8, 2018).

[10] Human intelligence evolved as a means of surviving and reproducing in large and complex social groups. Reasoning is an evolutionary adaptation to help us cooperate and solve problems in our social world.

See **Thinking Big**: How the Evolution of Social Life Shaped the Human Mind by Gamble, Gowlett & Dunbar.

[11] **Cognitive Dissonance** is the *mental discomfort* experienced when confronting conflicting beliefs, values, or behaviors.

[12] I took data from my NPR outlet in 2016 *prior* to the election of Donald Trump. Jefferson Public Radio's content was 83% Left-biased — overwhelmingly Progressive-Left. Less than 1% was Right-biased.

See Oregon Education Project Investigation **Technopoly**.

Explainers Learn to Think Critically About the World

Brief primers providing basic information about a particular topic, point of view, or "doctrine". They include links to online references and resources (in the digital versions).





Rob Schläpfer is a retired social science educator who spent over a decade conducting classes and community conversations to bridge Oregon's deep political divide.

A former pastor, professor, and publisher, he's taught critical thinking, civics, and cultural studies for over four decades.

He created the Oregon Education Project to promote high-quality American Education grounded in The Science of Learning.