

Wisdom of the Established Pattern

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INTRODUCTION

This short essay explores the plausible wisdom of status quo bias and questions the attempt by Bostrom and Ord to negate its influence. Assuming that the standard role of reason in judgment-formation is only second to affect, I propose that attempts to study and counter cognitive biases should focus on the underlying emotional dispositions. With or without rational descriptions, such innate inclinations of our cognition likely contain some enduring adaptive value.

Cognitive biases are deviations from reason-based judgment-formation. They are largely due to conflicts between our subjective image of the world and objective reality. Attaining an exhaustive comprehension of the complex interactions of natural and social worlds is impossible, so we have evolved to operate by relying on a built-in navigation system. Most of our choices we do not base on precise rational modeling but on a far more ancient response mechanism. Sense-making and decision making follow the order of their evolutionary emergence: intuition first, strategic reasoning second. According to Jonathan Haidt, even our moral reasoning mainly functions as a post-hoc confirmation of the preceding affective judgments.¹ The constructed rationalizations are our attempt to understand and unravel the mystery of our intuition and its pragmatic insights.

I. Disposition to Resist Change

Dispositions are enduring patterns of mental processing. As our inherent qualities, they direct our reactions toward changes transpiring around us. Rather than being an instance of dissonance within the cognitive system, influences like the status quo bias originate outside of it. Therefore, shifting the emphasis from cognitive to affective level gives us a better starting point for evaluating the basis and merit of each identified deviation pattern. Affective responses may appear irrational, yet these have in time become established for solid evolutionary reasons. This might not make them ethically or scientifically appropriate, but nonetheless, we should acknowledge the extensive contribution of these patterns to the success of our species.

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In his well-known bioethical writing on repugnance, Leon Kass defended the value of disgust that is experienced over perceived violations against nature.² He argued that this emotional impulse is an expression of nature's wisdom, a deeper understanding of the world that human reason is unable to fully articulate. From the evolutionary standpoint, the importance of such intrinsic dispositions and the resulting affective judgments are indeed easy to defend.³ Humans can attain a significant fitness advantage through reliable collaboration, which requires people to operate according to shared rules. The experienced revulsion toward norm violators gave us a built-in advocate for doing the right thing – even in the absence of authorities. Affect-based moral dispositions enacted a prosocial force over our ancestors, who later articulated and codified this acted-out morality. Therefore, our emotional impulses can be rich in pragmatic ethical wisdom.

The intuition to resist change has a similar evolutionary origin. In the absence of a sufficient understanding of the indirect and extended consequences of an alteration, it is generally more advantageous to preserve the status quo. The emotional tendency to experience unease when deviating from conventions can manifest itself in a variety of contexts from politics to healthcare. Forms of affective sway over individual or societal attempts to be logical probably stem from the same roots as our moral sense. The resistance to violating the status quo is indeed often flavored with moral outrage toward the change.

Psychologically, maintaining the status quo requires less effort, intention, and awareness.⁴ This clearly makes it our standard setting and a considerable cognitive bias. In a sense, this psychological distaste for novelty safeguards against divergent and untested solutions to recurring problems. In the language of Kass, this predisposition is an expression of rarely articulated conventional wisdom.⁵ The likelihood of triggering a catastrophe is minimal when following a long-ago-established tradition or pattern of behavior. On the contrary, unprecedented actions always carry unforeseeable consequences.

It is likely that many yet-unidentified tendencies have indispensably influenced human decision making. In aggregate, the impact of each established sway must have proven advantageous, even if outcomes in isolated instances would not invariably be optimal or even beneficial. Such features of our cognitive processing can therefore contain adaptive value or natural wisdom, even if we have not identified them or defined their precise function. Therefore, an inability to articulate a rationale for an omission that seeks to maintain the *status quo* should not be considered indisputable evidence of a misstep.

II. Detecting and Eliminating Irrational Stances

In a paper that introduced the Reversal Test, Bostrom and Ord argued that it is improbable that the current state of affairs is the best possible one regarding any single parameter that could either be increased or decreased.⁶ They suggest this proposed improbability justifies shifting the burden of proof to those in favor of preserving the status quo. According to their example, if someone is opposed to increasing as well as decreasing the average human intelligence, they need a good reason for why the current level is optimal. This thinking suggests that the present state of nature is incidental and has no wisdom or justificatory standing.

The authors acknowledged the counterargument based on evolutionary adaptation but questioned the present adaptive value of the evolved human traits and tendencies. The undeniable advantage of reason-based decision making is its universal applicability, while intuitions are context specific. We did not evolve to perform in macroeconomics or quantum physics. Reliance on anything except systematic and rational decision making is therefore inappropriate when studying them, even if we would generally recognize our

emotional responses to convey useful insights. Have the instincts that were shaped by a now vanished world become a handicap for scientific and ethical inquiry within our ultra-modern circumstance?

III. Enduring Wisdom

We can contend with this uncertainty over present adaptive value by either relying on the established patterns of judgment-formation before maladaptiveness is demonstrated or by insisting on fully rational conduct without any mental shortcuts or filtering of information. For me, it is not obvious where the onus to provide evidence on the enduring value of each deviation resides. Humans themselves have not fundamentally changed, so many of our social instincts may hold and there is a plausible pragmatic wisdom in suspicion toward societal change. Besides, human culture has built upon our evolved dispositions and adjusted them for new purposes. The value of an established deviation may remain unclear when an identified bias is interrogated only in relation to a specific parameter. Variables of psychology, society, and nature are not independent but intricately interconnected. The wisdom of our intuition might not reveal itself case by case – rather it resides in its broad undefined influence over humanity. Depending on the context, this influence should be protected against or granted an opportunity to protect us.

CONCLUSION

Reasons behind established conventions and practices may not become evident until some innovation alters the status quo. It may then be too late to prevent the unexpected downsides, downstream from the change. Similarly, the pragmatic value of natural tendencies that have shaped and defined our mental patterns can remain concealed until a disruption. Arguably, a stance or disposition contains wisdom if it accounts for the overarching pattern, even if its applicability in individual cases is questionable. Therefore, the bias toward preserving the status quo is like a natural caution to favor slow change over rapid. The psychological preference for the established pattern introduces a little inertia to the ever-changing parameters of our world. Rather than reasoning ourselves to a sensible midpoint between societal stagnation and upheaval, arriving there may partially depend on following our collective instinctive navigation system.

¹ Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: a social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological review*, 108(4), 814–834.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295x.108.4.814>

² Kass, L. (1998). The Wisdom of Repugnance: Why We Should Ban the Cloning of Humans. *Val. U. L. Rev.* 32(2), 679–705.

<https://scholar.valpo.edu/vulr/vol32/iss2/12>

³ Mamelj, M. (2013). Meat made us moral: a hypothesis on the nature and evolution of moral judgment. *Biol Philos* 28, 903–931.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-013-9401-3>

⁴ Eidelman, S., & Crandall, C., 'CHAPTER 4 A Psychological Advantage for the Status Quo' (pp. 85–106), in Jost, J., Kay, A., and Thorisdottir H. (eds), *Social and Psychological Bases of Ideology and System Justification* (New York, 2009; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 May 2009). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195320916.003.004>

⁵ Kass, L. (1998). The Wisdom of Repugnance: Why We Should Ban the Cloning of Humans. *Val. U. L. Rev.* 32(2), 679–705.

<https://scholar.valpo.edu/vulr/vol32/iss2/12>

⁶ Bostrom, N., & Ord, T. (2006). The Reversal Test: Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics. In *Ethics* 116(4), 656–679.

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