

ANSWERING AN EASIER QUESTION

A remarkable aspect of your mental life is that you are rarely stumped. True, you occasionally face a question such as $17 \times 24 = ?$ to which no answer comes immediately to mind, but these dumbfounded moments are rare. The normal state of your mind is that you have intuitive feelings and opinions about almost everything that comes your way. You like or dislike people long before you know much about them; you trust or distrust strangers without knowing why; you feel that an enterprise is bound to succeed without analyzing it. Whether you state them or not, you often have answers to questions that you do not completely understand, relying on evidence that you can neither explain nor defend.

SUBSTITUTING QUESTIONS

I propose a simple account of how we generate intuitive opinions on complex matters. If a satisfactory answer to a hard question is not found quickly, System 1 will find a related question that is easier and will answer it. I call the operation of answering one question in place of another *substitution*. I also adopt the following terms:

The target question is the assessment you intend to produce.

The heuristic question is the simpler question that you answer instead.

The technical definition of *heuristic* is a simple procedure that helps find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to difficult questions. The word comes from the same root as *eureka*.

The idea of substitution came up early in my work with Amos, and it was the core of what became the heuristics and biases approach. We asked ourselves how people manage to make judgments of probability without knowing precisely what probability is. We concluded that people must somehow simplify that impossible task, and we set out to find how they do it. Our answer was that when called upon to judge probability, people actually judge something else and believe they have judged probability. System 1 often makes this move when faced with difficult target questions, if the answer to a related and easier heuristic question comes readily to mind.

Substituting one question for another can be a good strategy for solving difficult problems, and George Pólya included substitution in his classic *How to Solve It*: “If you can’t solve a problem, then there is an easier problem you can solve: find it.” Pólya’s heuristics are strategic procedures that are deliberately implemented by System 2. But the heuristics that I discuss in this chapter are not chosen; they are a consequence of the mental shotgun, the imprecise control we have over targeting our responses to questions.

Consider the questions listed in the left-hand column of [table 1](#). These are difficult questions, and before you can produce a reasoned answer to any of them you must deal with other difficult issues. What is the meaning of happiness? What are the likely political developments in the next six months? What are the standard sentences for other financial crimes? How strong is the competition that the candidate faces? What other environmental or other causes should be considered? Dealing with these questions seriously is completely impractical. But you are not limited to perfectly reasoned answers to questions. There is a heuristic alternative to careful reasoning, which sometimes works fairly well and sometimes leads to serious errors.

Target Question

How much would you contribute to save an endangered species?

Heuristic Question

How much emotion do I feel when I think of dying

	dolphins?
How happy are you with your life these days?	What is my mood right now?
How popular will the president be six months from now?	How popular is the president right now?
How should financial advisers who prey on the elderly be punished?	How much anger do I feel when I think of financial predators?
This woman is running for the primary. How far will she go in politics?	Does this woman look like a political winner?

Table 1

The mental shotgun makes it easy to generate quick answers to difficult questions without imposing much hard work on your lazy System 2. The right-hand counterpart of each of the left-hand questions is very likely to be evoked and very easily answered. Your feelings about dolphins and financial crooks, your current mood, your impressions of the political skill of the primary candidate, or the current standing of the president will readily come to mind. The heuristic questions provide an off-the-shelf answer to each of the difficult target questions.

Something is still missing from this story: the answers need to be fitted to the original questions. For example, my feelings about dying dolphins must be expressed in dollars. Another capability of System 1, intensity matching, is available to solve that problem. Recall that both feelings and contribution dollars are intensity scales. I can feel more or less strongly about dolphins and there is a contribution that matches the intensity of my feelings. The dollar amount that will come to my mind is the matching amount. Similar intensity matches are possible for all the questions. For example, the political skills of a candidate can range from pathetic to extraordinarily impressive, and the scale of political success can

range from the low of “She will be defeated in the primary” to a high of “She will someday be president of the United States.”

The automatic processes of the mental shotgun and intensity matching often make available one or more answers to easy questions that could be mapped onto the target question. On some occasions, substitution will occur and a heuristic answer will be endorsed by System 2. Of course, System 2 has the opportunity to reject this intuitive answer, or to modify it by incorporating other information. However, a lazy System 2 often follows the path of least effort and endorses a heuristic answer without much scrutiny of whether it is truly appropriate. You will not be stumped, you will not have to work very hard, and you may not even notice that you did not answer the question you were asked. Furthermore, you may not realize that the target question was difficult, because an intuitive answer to it came readily to mind.

THE 3-D HEURISTIC

Have a look at the picture of the three men and answer the question that follows.