I am writing this chapter in the midst of a pandemic that led to many examples of the propensity I wish to address. This is the propensity to ascribe beliefs we do not understand—or with which we simply disagree—to the irrationality of those who hold them. However, nothing particularly suits a pandemic to the expression of this propensity, which is of very long standing. The brief list of pandemic-related examples provided in Section I, then, is intended only to suggest that the propensity itself is pandemic. Section II provides a critical analysis of the examples, producing some basic principles of political epistemology. Section III applies these principles to three influential areas of research: the “heuristics and biases” research program, the motivated-reasoning paradigm, and the theory that voting in a large electorate is irrational. Finally, Section IV sketches three stances one might take toward the critique of irrationalism, or “political psychologism,” presented in Sections II and III.

I Four pandemic examples

1 A global health reporter, addressing the failure of “some of the most seasoned infectious diseases experts to recognize the full threat of what was bearing down on the world” in January and February 2020, concludes that the experts were victims of “magical thinking” (Branswell 2020).

2 A conservative pundit argues that the pandemic is not as severe as generally thought, and that the liberal media are victims of “hysteria” in failing to recognize this. In response, a liberal pundit lobs back the charge of irrationality, citing a psychologist claiming that “in a crisis event, one thing people do is engage in sense-making—seeking out facts and coming up with explanations,” as “a way of psychologically coping with the uncertainty and anxiety of the event, and of having agency in the response.” By blaming the media, the conservative pundit was responding, in effect, to his own hysteria (Warzel 2020).

3 The “Interpreter” columnist of the New York Times finds it puzzling that in the initial weeks of the pandemic, political leaders around the world became more popular—regardless of how well their governments were responding to the crisis. The solution to the puzzle, he suggests, is that “rallying around the flag” makes us feel “sane and stable during terrifying times” (Fischer 2020).
A political scientist tells a writer for *Politico* that conspiracy theories about whether
the Chinese government or some other nefarious agent caused the crisis were popular
because in a pandemic, “a lot of the psychological elements that give rise to conspiracy
theories are heightened: powerlessness and anxiety and uncertainty” (Stanton 2020).

I hope readers will register how commonplace this type of political psychologizing is. To
anyone who follows the news, I suspect, none of the examples will come across as the least
bit unusual. That, I will maintain, is a problem.

II Principles of (rationalist) political epistemology

One objection to political psychologism is that it has the effect of infantilizing those whose
beliefs and behavior are being explained. Political psychologism, one might say, fails to ac-
cord those being psychologized the respect that political theorists tend to think should be
accorded to our fellow citizens. However, one might reply that however much we should,
normatively, treat our fellow citizens with the respect due to rational adults, in particular
cases they may not “deserve” this respect, empirically: their beliefs or behavior may just be
too infantile, or otherwise irrational, to warrant respect. So I will bracket the ethical ob-
jection and, taking the perspective of empirical political epistemology, suggest that at the
very least, political psychologism poses serious risks of inaccuracy; and that, more radically,
it may always be inaccurate, as it is untrue to the phenomenology of human belief—which is
ineluctably rationalistic.

Thus, I will seek to establish that the examples presented above bespeak a particular type
of error—a neglect of the ideational causes of beliefs and actions—and that this error is pecu-
liarily anti-epistemological, as it is predicated on the tacit assumption that the truth, in a given
case, is self-evident, such that only an irrational psychological mechanism can explain why
someone might not acknowledge it. In short, political psychologism tends to ignore the very
possibility of mistaken, false, or illusory knowledge—the starting point of epistemologists
from Plato to Hobbes, Descartes, and Hume; and of philosophers of science from Popper to
Kuhn, Quine, and Feyerabend. To sloganize my message: psychology is not epistemology.
And the two may inherently be at odds.

Consider the examples in turn.

Example 1. The epidemiologists accused of engaging in magical thinking, it turns out—
according to the article that makes this accusation—had good reason to doubt the like-
lihood of a pandemic. Initially, according to the article, the disease did not “appear to be
behaving as explosively outside of China as it had inside it.” Moreover, “the world had
experience controlling coronavirus outbreaks” such as SARS and MERS (Branswell
2020). Thus, there is nothing irrational, on its face, about the fact that the scientists
errored in this case, so long as we recognize that scientists, being human, are not om-
niscent. The epistemologist does not deem people irrational merely by virtue of their
being ignorant or mistaken. Instead she deems them human, i.e., fallible and, ab initio,
ignorant.

Example 2. Contrary to the quoted psychologist, people “seek facts and come up with expla-
nations” all the time, not just in crisis situations. The psychologist, and the liberal pundit
quoting her, overlook the epistemic reason to seek facts and come up with explanations:
not to achieve emotional security, but to transcend one’s initial position of ignorance
so as to learn the truth. This epistemic reason is the engine of science, and would be
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irrational only if the truth were self-evident: that is, only if we were not initially ignorant of the truth, and thus had no need to discover it by seeking facts and coming up with explanations.

The conservative pundit, too, ignores the epistemic dimension by suggesting that journalists were “hysterical” merely because they thought they had discovered an alarming truth (i.e., that the contagion was of nearly unprecedented severity). The pundit’s psychologizing of the journalists explains nothing about their behavior that cannot more readily be explained by their search for truth. I say “more readily” because once we take account of the epistemic motive, there remains no puzzle to be resolved; while if we insist on an irrational motive, we need evidence that this motive, not the epistemic one, is in play. As with Example 1, then, I am suggesting, at the very least, that our default explanation for human beliefs should be epistemological, and thus rational.

In support of this suggestion, consider that we are not really capable of explaining any specific belief of our own as due to our need for psychological comfort, our hysteria, etc. To form and maintain a belief requires what appear to us—perhaps mistakenly, of course—to be sound reasons. If one actually thought that a certain belief of one’s own were due to a psychological factor, rather than due to one’s recognition of a good reason for the belief, one would not accept the belief. If one does accept it, it must be for some reason that, if sound, would warrant the belief.

We impose a double standard, then, when we psychologize others’ beliefs: we never psychologize our own. Arguably, then, our default approach to understanding others’ beliefs should be to assume that they, like us, have rational (yet possibly mistaken) reasons for their beliefs. This would not preclude the possibility that in a given case the double standard is warranted, but it would caution us to do what is too rarely done: try to understand beliefs with which we disagree before we explain them away as irrational.

Our pandemic propensity to instead use the irrationalist default setting may be due to our uncritical consumption of badly interpreted psychological findings (Section 3) and to an underemphasis on human fallibility, by which I mean both people’s frequently flawed logical abilities and people’s simple, innocent ignorance. Those who underestimate fallibility may fail to recognize that rational truth-seeking is an imperfect process that can produce, in the minds of other rational truth seekers, conclusions with which we do not agree—because either they or we are ignorant of evidence of which the other party is aware; or because either they or we are evaluating the same evidence differently, or even illogically. The irrationalist view—ironically, since it is an attempt at hard-headed realism—treats everyone as not only a truth seeker but a truth attainer: that is, as effectively omniscient. Once the truth is treated, in effect, as self-evident to one and all, what would, for an epistemologist, count as a failure of some (or all) of the parties to a disagreement to know the truth must count as some parties’ perverse rejection of the known truth—which can only be deemed irrational.

Cognitive psychologists (as opposed to social and political psychologists) have a useful term for the view that one’s own opinions are self-evidently true, i.e., that they are unmediated by fallible human processes of data gathering, interpretation, and communication: naïve realism (Ross and Ward 1996). Naïve realists treat their own beliefs as if they were self-evidently true emanations of reality itself, such that anyone who disagrees with their beliefs must, ipso facto, be irrational. I am suggesting that irrationalist explanations of others’ beliefs may manifest naïve realism, such that the naïve realist attributes irrationality to the Other by neglecting the possibility that the Other—or the naïve realist herself—is simply mistaken.
Example 3. The methodological consequence of naïve realism is a failure of intellectual charity. By that I mean a failure to put oneself into the shoes of those whose belief one is tempted to diagnose as irrational so as to see why, from the Other’s perspective, the belief might actually be rational (even if we continue to see it as mistaken).

Intellectual charity is not the same thing as interpretive charity (e.g., Davidson 1973–1974). Interpretive charity has come to mean, among analytic philosophers, the attribution to the Other of the best arguments that one can think of for the conclusions advocated by the Other. This procedure is merited if one is interested in arguing against the strongest possible opponent. However, if one is interested not in arguing, but in understanding—that is, understanding real people, not imaginary interlocutors—intellectual charity goes too far. Unlike interpretively charitable interpretations, intellectually charitable interpretations do not credit the Other with the best arguments for her conclusions, but with arguments, other ideas, and (putative) knowledge that may actually be present in the Other’s web of belief, and that, if present, would make the Other’s conclusions rational—even if they are mistaken. Intellectual charity, then, allows for the possibility that the Other might be making bad arguments that seem plausible to her, whether because she is unwittingly making logical errors, is ignorant of something that the observer thinks relevant, or is interpreting some (putative) fact differently than the observer interprets it.

Consider “rallying around the flag.” If we try to put ourselves in the shoes of the survey respondents in various countries who believed that their leaders’ performance warranted the respondents’ approval, it is fairly easy to come up with epistemological, non-psychological, non-irrationalist explanations for this belief—even if we think the belief mistaken. Perhaps they saw the pandemic as a difficult situation to deal with, such that they set a low bar for adequate performance and focused only on whether their leaders cleared it, regardless of by how much. And perhaps even respondents who were inclined to compare leaders’ performance across countries did not know about the statistics that, in the Times Interpreter’s mind, clearly identified some leaders, such as Boris Johnson, as relative failures in comparison to others, such as Angela Merkel. A third possibility is that even respondents who were aware of these statistics, and who found them relevant to judging their own leaders’ performance, disagreed with the Interpreter’s assessment of which leaders were performing better. They might have thought, for example, that German culture was more conducive to an effective response to the pandemic than British culture because German culture fosters obedience to authority; this stereotype might have been seen as excusing Johnson’s poor performance vis-à-vis Merkel’s. The stereotype may be mistaken, as may the judgment to which it leads, but we have no reason to assume that these mistakes are irrational—rather than stemming from different beliefs than our own.

Thus, intellectual charity corrects the default inclination to psychologize the survey results. They present no puzzle so great that we must resort to irrationalist explanations if we do not treat our own assessment of the leaders’ relative performance as self-evidently warranted, and if we therefore do not project this assessment into the heads of survey respondents (on the tacit grounds that if it is self-evident to us, it must be self-evident to them). This is not to say, of course, that any one of the intellectually charitable explanations that we might come up with in a given case is accurate; that is an empirical question that would require investigation by empirical political epistemologists. It is to say, however, that the naïve realist may produce an inaccurate explanation.
of the behavior in question if, blinded by naïve realism, she does not even attempt to be intellectually charitable.

The *New York Times* Interpreter, for example, in imputing to the survey respondents his own knowledge about different leaders’ relative statistical performance, credits even people who do not carefully read, say, the *New York Times*, or who do not read it at all, with knowing in detail what is reported there. Such *imputations of knowledge* are characteristic of naïvely realistic approaches to understanding human beliefs and actions. An intellectually charitable analyst would pause, before imputing knowledge (or putative knowledge) to the Other, to ask where the Other might have gotten this knowledge (or putative knowledge), given that the truth is *not* self-evident—i.e., given that the human starting point is ignorance, not knowledge. An empirical political epistemologist might then investigate the Other’s sources of knowledge, or rather belief (e.g., her media diet). In most cases, this simple step will go a long way toward explaining any seemingly irrational political belief.

It may seem paradoxical that intellectual “charity” encourages a recognition of others’ *mistakenness*. But the intellectually charitable view that British survey respondents might have seen German culture as cultivating obedience to authority does not entail *agreement* with this belief; it is thus consistent with a recognition that the respondents are rational even if mistaken. Accordingly, an important principle of political epistemology is the injunction to operate only at the second order, bracketing one’s own agreement or disagreement with the first-order beliefs one is investigating. Intellectual charity, then, is not a prescription for relativism. It is simply a recognition of the fact that human fallibility may afflict either oneself or the Other one is trying to understand, and that one should not treat one’s own beliefs as truths so self-evident that one is licensed to impute one’s own knowledge and logic, or putative knowledge and logic, to the Other. If we fail to follow this injunction, we become unable to understand the Other on her own terms, i.e., as a rational being, and this will leave us little recourse but to seek irrationalist explanations of our disagreements with the Other. We cannot put ourselves in the Other’s shoes if all we can imagine standing there is somebody with our own (self-evidently true) beliefs, such that her failure to act as if she shares those beliefs indicates her irrationality—rather than indicating our failure to grasp that she simply has different beliefs than we do, beliefs we consider mistaken. Our naïve realism may thus feed into our *psychologizing of disagreement* with the Other and, thus, our inability to understand accurately those with whom we disagree. We can avoid this trap only if we bracket our first-order beliefs, and thus our potential disagreements with the Other—which are, after all, utterly irrelevant, causally, to the Other’s beliefs (at least when the Other is unaware of us and our beliefs).

First-order belief bracketing probably entails the abandonment of not just naïvely realistic psychologizing but also of the philosophical attempt to *moralize* disagreement by treating beliefs with which a given philosopher disagrees as violations of epistemic “norms,” and thus as exemplifying epistemic “vices.” In treating the Other as violating our (beliefs about) epistemic norms in a culpable (vicious) manner, we are failing to recognize that the Other might rationally (if, perhaps, mistakenly) disagree with us about the normativity of those norms or about whether, in the case at hand, she has violated them. We are then treating our norms and our understanding of the reasons for the Other’s beliefs as if they are so self-evidently true that they *must be* agreed upon by the Other (at the first order)—who then contradicts herself, viciously acting as if she does not agree with them. We do better to recognize that the contradiction between the “knowledge”
we impute to the Other and the behavior in which she engages may indicate not the viciousness of her habits but the inaccuracy of our imputation. That, in turn, suggests that the epistemological perspective is *ideationally deterministic*. It recognizes that mistake is involuntary—one never deliberately errs—and thus cannot be explained as a culpable choice, any more than it can be explained as psychologically determined. Rather, if the Other is mistaken, the cause is whatever items in her web of belief combine to form the judgment with which we disagree; or an error in the logic by which these items have been combined. The middle ground between perfect knowledge and irrationality is thus the ground of beliefs that are determined not by choice, nor by psychological forces, but by fallible processes of rational belief formation.

*Example 4.* Even philosophers pursuing the “epistemic norms” project have failed to come up with a persuasive reason to think that conspiracy theorists, as such, are epistemically vicious, let alone irrational. For (on the whole) they have recognized that in principle, any given conspiracy theory, or perhaps even all of them, might be true; and that conspiracy theorists tend to be such asiduous and rigorous investigators of the empirical evidence that they *consider plausible* that they may “amass sufficient evidence to rationally believe certain conspiracy theories” (Harris 2009, 240). When there is a problem with a particular conspiracy theory (from the perspective of any given observer), it usually comes down to the observer’s first-order disagreement with the plausibility of, the importance of, or the interpretation of the evidence adduced by the conspiracy theorist. Such disagreement can be assumed to indicate a psychological problem (for the conspiracy theorist) only if the observer treats her own first-order position as so self-evidently true that the conspiracy theorist *must* be irrational to disagree with it.

Thus, what the *Politico* writer treats as incorrect or preposterous conspiracy theories—e.g. “that the coronavirus was spread deliberately; that the pandemic is over-exaggerated in an attempt to hurt President Trump’s reelection; [or] that this whole thing was some sort of bioweapon created in a Chinese lab” (Stanton 2020)—are *plainly* incorrect, or *inherently* preposterous, only from a naïvely realistic standpoint, from which one treats the conspiracy theorists as knowing, in some sense, that what they believe is incorrect or preposterous. But if one is to put oneself into the Other’s shoes, one must not efface the empirical otherness of the Other, i.e., the differences between her web of belief and our own—erasing her in the process. (This is the problem with interpretive charity, as opposed to intellectual charity.) This erasure begins when we impute (what we consider to be) our knowledge to her. Having made such an imputation, we cannot possibly understand why she behaves as if a conspiracy we “know” to be preposterous is credible. Similarly, our judgment that certain sources of information are *inherently* suspect and thus should not be trusted by the conspiracy theorist comes down to a disagreement with the Other about whether these sources really are inherently suspect: she plainly thinks that they aren’t.

The attribution of irrationality is, in the end, a refusal to countenance the possibility that one’s own beliefs, about trustworthiness or anything else, are not self-evidently true, such that other rational beings may disagree with them.

### III Naïve realism in the academy

The problem of naïve realism, leading to intellectually uncharitable attributions of knowledge to others, and to unjustified attributions of irrationality to them when they disagree...
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with us, is ubiquitous not just in political culture but academic psychology and other disciplines. For reasons of space, I confine myself to three examples before reflecting on their implications.

Consider first the “motivated-reasoning” framework for understanding dogmatism. In political psychology, the most widely cited application of this framework has been Charles Taber and Milton Lodge’s (2006) paper, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs” (cited 2,823 times by mid-2020). The authors gave subjects the opportunity to read arguments that were congruent or incongruent with the subjects’ initial beliefs about affirmative action and gun control. Most subjects then became more persuaded of the veracity of their prior beliefs than they had been before the experiment—even if they read incongruent arguments, which, the authors assume, should have weakened their priors rather than strengthening them. This effect was predominantly found among subjects who were likely to be relatively well-informed about affirmative action and gun control and among those who had stronger initial beliefs about these issues. The authors conclude that “rather than moderating or simply maintaining their original attitudes, citizens—especially those who feel strongly about the issue and are the most sophisticated—strengthen their attitudes in ways not warranted by the evidence” (Taber and Lodge 2006, 756, my emphasis).

Only if the emphasized words were true would the subjects’ dogmatic behavior warrant the inference that they were in the grip of a non-epistemic motive, such as ego defense, that steered them away from the clear—self-evident—implication of incongruent evidence for their priors, namely that this evidence should reduce their confidence, not increase it. Yet their gains in confidence may have stemmed from the subjects’ disagreement with the authors’ assumptions about the appropriate procedure for rationally updating their beliefs. In the authors’ view, apparently, the rational procedure is not to judge the incongruent evidence in light of previously assimilated evidence. That is, incongruent evidence is not to be screened for its plausibility. It is far from obvious that this is the most rational way to proceed, let alone that it is self-evidently the best way. Surely there can be legitimate differences of opinion as to whether any evidence thrown one’s way in a laboratory experiment should be treated as a good reason to doubt one’s priors. It may, in fact, be rational for incongruent evidence to strengthen one’s priors once the evidence is placed into the wider context of one’s extant web of belief. Thus, Lee Ross (2012, 236), a coauthor of the classic article on naïve realism, suggests that Taber and Lodge’s subjects may have said to themselves, in effect: “‘If that’s the best [the other side] can do to support their argument, I’m even more certain [than before] that they are wrong.’” This interpretation is all the more compelling since the most dogmatic subjects were those with the strongest and (evidentially) best-supported priors. The evidence and logic for their priors may, from their perspective, have rationally justified a rejection of the arguments presented in the lab as implausible. If this response to the arguments is a mistake, it surely is not such an obvious mistake that the subjects must somehow have realized (unconsciously) that they were violating authoritative epistemic norms, which only an extra-epistemic motive could explain.²

My next example is drawn from behavioral economics—the branch of psychology that surely provides the most popular irrationalist framework in the academy today. The list of “heuristics and biases” that behavioral economists have come up with is, of course, quite long and it keeps growing. All I can do is select an example of the genre that lends itself to abbreviated exposition and epistemological critique. In Section 4, I will address the fact that we are not in a position to know if such examples are representative of the quality of research in the field as a whole.
My example is a landmark experiment that gets its own chapter in Daniel Kahneman’s popularization of behavioral economics, *Thinking: Fast and Slow* (2011). Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1973, 238–39) presented subjects with a character sketch of “Tom W.” that portrays him as an intelligent, socially awkward science fiction reader. The subjects were then asked to rank various fields of graduate specialization “in order of the likelihood that Tom is now a graduate student in each of these fields.” Ninety-five percent of the subjects believed that Tom was likelier to be studying computer science than “the humanities or education.” This belief is irrational, according to the authors, because the subjects “were surely aware that there are many more graduate students in the latter field” (my emphasis), such that the odds are greater that Tom is in the latter field.

Thus, the authors attribute to the subjects accurate knowledge of a topic to which most of them had probably never given a moment’s thought before the experiment began: the statistical distribution of graduate students across academic disciplines in the United States circa 1973. Surely such statistics are not self-evident. Yet if the subjects were simply ignorant of them, there is no reason to assume that they irrationally preferred to use the stereotype of a computer geek *rather than* using the statistics. According to the authors, “base-rate neglect” is one of the most important human biases, but without their naïvely realistic attribution of base-rate knowledge to the subjects, base-rate neglect would have to be seen as ignorance of obscure statistics, which is in no sense irrational—except from the perspective of an omniscient being.

Third and finally, consider a theory that commands widespread assent among political scientists: the theory that citizens who vote in an election with a large electorate, and who intend thereby to help achieve an outcome—such as the adoption of the policies favored by their candidate or party (as opposed to citizens who vote from a sense of duty)—are irrational, because the odds against any one vote being decisive are so high that it is extremely improbable that the outcome will be affected by one’s vote (Downs 1957). The theory naïvely attributes knowledge of those odds to the voters—with no evidence to justify the attribution. Indeed, survey research suggests that people tend to think that their votes are *likely* to make a difference, such that they could not possibly know the odds against this (Friedman 2019, 277–78). This stands to reason, as the depressing mathematics of voting are rarely discussed in popular culture (where it is repeatedly maintained, in fact, that “every vote counts”). Moreover, the theory is falsified every time people do vote in large electorates, which happens without fail when mass elections are held: people vote, by the millions, despite the odds.

The naïve attribution to voters of knowledge of these odds is foundational to arguments for both the *rationality* of voters’ ignorance of political affairs and public policy (e.g. Somin 2013; Brennan 2016) and the rationality of holding *plainly irrational* beliefs about these matters (e.g. Caplan 2007). Here the theorist attributes voters’ failure to acquire knowledge that the theorist considers important, and voters’ consequent endorsement of policies that the theorist considers irrational, to voters’ (assumed, not demonstrated) knowledge of the odds against their votes mattering. If voters knew these odds, they would rationally decide not to spend resources on informing their (inefficacious) votes. And in the void created by their rationally chosen ignorance, they might feel licensed to indulge in irrational “emotion and ideology,” as they recognize that their underinformed, emotional, ideological votes are unlikely to make any difference (Caplan 2007, 2). All of this, however, is predicated on the assumption that voters know that their votes are highly unlikely to matter—an assumption that is never defended, and is inconsistent with both the survey evidence and the fact that voters vote. Once again, naïve realism leads to an unwarranted ascription of irrationality that
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IV How mythical is political irrationality?

One cannot possibly establish the prevalence of false attributions of irrationality with a few examples. How, then, should we treat the examples I have adduced?

One possibility would be to treat them *positivistically*: that is, as suggesting that social scientists should test rationalist, interpretively charitable hypotheses against the irrationalist interpretations that are hegemonic in the psychology literature. For example, they could try to replicate the “Tom W.” experiment but tell the subjects what the base rates are. Supposing that they were to embark upon this endeavor, however, political epistemologists would need to know, in the meantime, how to treat the vast ocean of findings that have not yet been re-tested, which is pretty much coextensive with the truly gigantic literature of social and political psychology. Should we, as consumers of this literature, treat it as innocent until proven guilty, or vice versa?

The most conservative positivist tack would be to treat the examples of badly interpreted psychological findings as anomalous, such that all the other irrationalist findings continue to guide our thinking until social scientists get around to re-testing them. More radically, we could treat all of those findings with suspicion, pending re-testing, on the following grounds: our introspective experience of our own rationality counts as empirical evidence against the irrationalist double standard common to all such findings (although not indefeasible evidence). Thus, if we ask ourselves if we ever “ignore” base rates that we know about and understand the relevance of; if we ourselves ever trust media sources that we find inherently untrustworthy, or—one might add (to begin a very long list of other irrationalist findings)—whether we ourselves ever believe something because we want to “identify” with a social group by accepting its beliefs as true (e.g. Achen and Bartels 2016; Kahan 2016), rather than simply agreeing with its beliefs because they rationally seem to us to be true, the answer appears to be that we don’t. For scientific reasons, then, we should treat others as rational until we have evidence to the contrary, where “evidence” refers to positivist findings from research in which rationalist and irrationalist explanations for particular behavior are tested against each other. For we have introspective empirical evidence in favor of the rationalist conclusion, and science should never ignore empirical evidence.

However, there are several reasons to think that the more radical positivist approach, which would merely deprive irrationalist findings of the benefit of the doubt prior to re-testing them, is not radical enough.

First, it may not be fruitful to re-test, because what is often at issue is not the behavior revealed in the laboratory but its interpretation. In the case of motivated reasoning, for example, Ross simply offered an alternative interpretation of Taber and Lodge’s findings. It may be impossible to test the two interpretations against each other, because Ross is saying that people who behave *precisely as Taber and Lodge’s dogmatic subjects behave* may do so not from a non-epistemic “motive” but an epistemic motive pursued in a manner that Taber and Lodge find “obviously” irrational. In his interpretation of the subjects’ behavior, Ross appeals to our introspectively derived knowledge of what would “make sense” of the behavior for putatively rational beings such as ourselves. Taber and Lodge prefer, in effect, to assign control over our behavior to a homunculus secreted in our unconscious, which manipulates our behavior to defend our egos by protecting our beliefs from falsification (Friedman 2019, 243–47). Conflicting independent variables are being invoked to explain the same dependent variable, but the independent variables are metaphysical, not empirically observable.
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(It is worth repeating that one would only resort to the metaphysical homunculus because one assumes that there can be no rational explanation for the behavior.)

At the very least, then, it would seem to follow that political theorists and philosophers should end the practice of taking empirical researchers’ interpretations of their findings at face value. Empirical researchers are not selected and trained for introspective sensitivity (or metaphysical insight) but, rather, for statistical rigor and inventiveness in operationalizing hypotheses. This would explain why, as connoisseurs of their efforts will recognize, their findings are dazzling but their interpretations of the findings often fly in the face of introspection (ibid., 210–28). Therefore, we should never cite the interpretations as if they were findings, we should never fail to report the experimental procedures whose results are being interpreted, and we should never fail to look for intellectually charitable alternative interpretations.

Further grounds for caution about any positivistic approach, no matter how radically it questions empirical findings, are suggested by the reason that empirical researchers are not selected or trained for interpretive acuity. Those who select and train them are looking for scholars who will carry on the work of unearthing or refining laws or regularities of human behavior (ibid., chapter 4). That entails treating one’s research subjects (people) as predictable and largely homogeneous, which almost necessarily militates against a consideration of causal factors, such as beliefs, that may vary unpredictably, but not randomly, from person to person (ibid., chapter 3). This may explain the emphasis in the social sciences on people’s motives, such as self-interest, ego defense, or group identification: the number of motives that would apply across large populations is minuscule compared to the number of beliefs the members of those populations might have about which actions to take in pursuit of a given motive. The homogenizing, ahistorical, universalist ambitions of social scientists would also explain their emphasis on biases that are supposed to hold across all populations, regardless of the particular beliefs the individual members of a population might have. The very purpose of psychology, as a field of academic study, is to predict common and lasting phenomena, not those that are unpredictable or historically specific, as beliefs are. It is much easier to predict commonality by focusing on people’s (putative) motives or biases, in short, than by allowing that their behavior is the result of heterogeneous and fallible yet rational beliefs.

This last point, I think, tells in favor of a third, anti-positivist stance toward irrationalist social science: that we should neither treat it as innocent until proven guilty, nor as guilty until proven innocent, but as fundamentally incorrect. This is because unpredictable belief heterogeneity may occur not only among the populations in which social scientists are positing behavioral regularities, but between the observer and the observed. This is what may have happened in all the cases cited in both Sections I and III: in each case, the observers could not imagine beliefs that might rationally have prompted behavior that they therefore treated as irrational. By putting my imagination (and Lee Ross’s) to work, I hope to have shown that the observers may have overlooked rational beliefs that would have explained the behavior. But what happens if no observer happens to imagine what is going on in the minds of those whose behavior is being observed?

It is only to be expected that fallible, ideationally heterogeneous creatures will sometimes be unable to think of accurate explanations for the behavior of other such creatures. However homogeneous we are in our emotional and cognitive architecture, the beliefs populating that architecture are likely to vary, to some extent, from person to person. Because these beliefs, as mental phenomena, are inaccessible to observers, I may be unable to put myself into your shoes in a particular case. That, however, does not justify assuming that you have no reasons for your beliefs, rather than allowing that I am simply ignorant of what they are.
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If this line of thought is correct, we should treat irrationalist explanations as illegitimate in principle. Even if the behavior they attempt to explain cannot be explained rationally—by us—this may mean nothing more than that we cannot read other people’s minds. Our own failures of mind reading, however, do not justify the attribution of irrationality to those whose minds we cannot read.

Notes

1 See Friedman (2019, 61–75).
2 For a fuller critique of the motivated-reasoning literature, see ibid., 232–47.
3 For critiques, see ibid., 277–83 on Somin; Gunn (2019) on Brennan; Bennett and Friedman (2008) on Caplan.
4 I attempt such an exploration of “ignorant voters” in Friedman (2019, 264–301).

References