

## Being Alive

I once read that the brain uses roughly 20% of the body's energy. It's staggering that this three-pound organ consumes such caloric intake, revealing the cost of those billions of neurons and synapses processing the world around us. Despite the good this organ provides us—giving us creativity and problem-solving—such maintenance comes with its challenges. Fueling such demand isn't easy, nor was it for our ancestors. It's hard work to be alive and awake, and as such, humans learned to move through the world more efficiently by developing *heuristics*.



## Heuristics

Heuristics are mental shortcuts that reduce the cognitive effort needed to make decisions.

Heuristics are rules of thumb that help us reach conclusions rapidly; snap judgments that prevent cognitive overload. For example, our brains are more favorable to people, things, or places they've experienced before. Familiar environments put us at ease. Our brain tells us, "We've already been here and scanned it for danger. We are safe." Or how many of us have been presented with a problem and, instead of deducing a logical answer, we just have a "gut feeling" about it? This could be years of experience creating an affective shortcut to save us all the mental calculations.

## Both Sides of Heuristics

At their best, heuristics can be expressions of deep wisdom. We face thousands of problems in our lifetime shaping and forming (hopefully) virtuous habits that we lean upon to navigate this world. Yet, despite the good that heuristics provide—efficient decision-making and energy preservation—such shortcuts come with their challenges. Heuristics contribute to cognitive biases. This mental cruising leads us to inaccurate conclusions, lazy handling of the facts, and the poor habit of mistaking personal anecdotes for universal truth.

We see the negative side of heuristics in the Gospel of John. When presented with the testimony of the Messiah's arrival from Nazareth, Nathaniel questions the claim with a pre-conceived notion: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" We are left wondering what previous experience guided Nathaniel to this heuristic of Nazarenes.

New data comes in -> data is strained through our heuristic web -> inaccurate conclusion is reached.

## Looking Again

We do this all the time with new information. Sometimes it's trivial, like deciding whether to eat at a new restaurant. Sometimes it's consequential, like forming an opinion on societal issues like generational poverty. Either way, heuristics effect our lives, and notably our spiritual lives.

This introspective season of Lent, I'm trying to pay more attention to the data around me. What am I seeing, hearing, feeling? Before jumping to conclusions or giving an interpretation, look again. What if I sat in the awkwardness of not having to know, interpret, or make meaning of everything around me? It's hard stay awake, be mindful, and notice things as if I were experiencing them for the first time. I'm trying to sit in those moments of just *being*, trusting that the God of surprises, paradox, and mystery—who gave me my *being*—will meet me there.



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