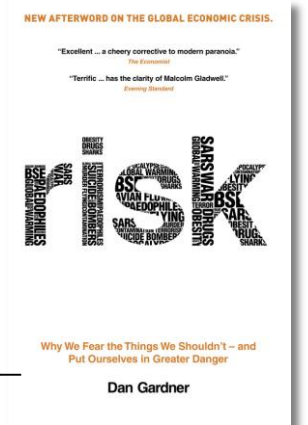


communicating risk

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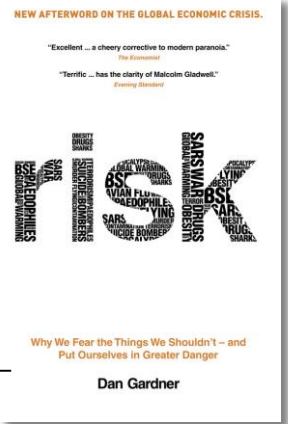


We are surrounded by hazards of every imaginable variety and severity, which means we are — whether we are aware of it or not — constantly judging what to worry about and what to ignore. How do we do that? Why are our judgments sometimes flawed? And how can convince others when we feel they've made a mistake?

The answer to these questions begins deep in the history of our species.

Imagine one of our ancient ancestors, hunting and gathering 100,000 years ago. Like us, he faces a myriad of threats, from the weather to contaminated water. Like us, he must judge what to worry about and what to ignore.

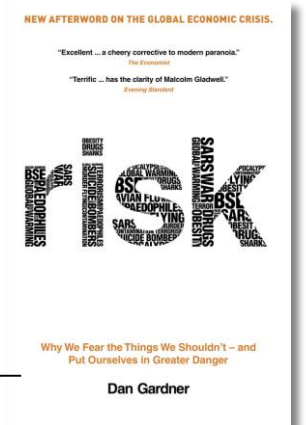
What do we know about his risk assessments?



1. He did not use science or statistics. They didn't exist.
2. Instead, he relied on his experience and senses.
3. He needed snap judgments so his decisions were quick and intuitive.
4. He had to act vigorously. Strong, clear judgments supported that. So his judgments tended to be confident and decisive, avoiding “maybe.”
5. To deliver quick, confident judgments, he had to assume that whatever information he had at the moment was not only sufficient but all the information available. So he obeyed the acronym “WYSIATI” —what you see is all there is.
6. Quick, confident judgments also called for “naive realism” — meaning he assumed that everything he perceived was objective reality, rather than (as neuroscience conclusively shows) a subjective mental representation of reality.

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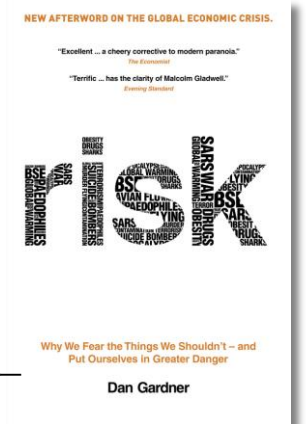
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Over tens of thousands of years, there was little technological change. People continued to make risk assessments. And they continued to make them using the same essential features.

Even with the development of agriculture, the growth of towns and cities, and the many technological advances through most of recorded history, people continued to make risks assessments and the essential features of those judgments were unchanged:

- 1/ No science or statistics
- 2/ Based on experience and senses
- 3/ Quick and intuitive
- 4/ Decisive and confident
- 5/ WYSIATI
- 6/ Naive realism



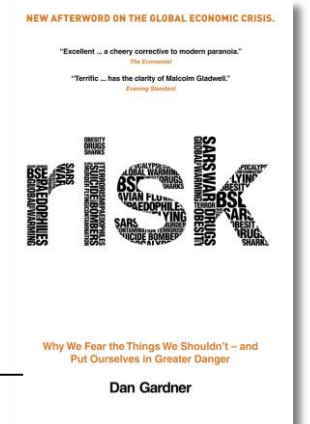
By even the most generous definition, modern science is about 500 years old. Probability as we now understand it was first explored 400 years ago. The word “scientist” was coined in 1833. The extensive collection of statistics is little more than a century old, as is universal literacy needed for the masses to understand science, probability, and numbers.

But now we are in a modern, transformed world. We can measure in parts per trillion and see across light years.

But some things haven't changed. We still make risk assessments constantly.

And we do it mostly the same way as our ancient ancestors

Why? Because our brains evolved in their environment, not ours.



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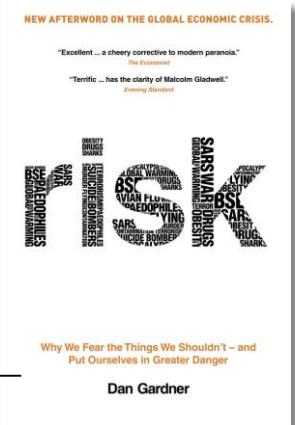
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To understand decision-making, psychologists today use a two-system model.

System Two is conscious thought. Puzzle your way through a math problem and you are using System Two. Conscious thought is slow. It takes time and effort.

System One is all the brain does that consciousness is not aware of. That turns out to be most of what the brain does. And it is the source of snap judgments — the sudden, intuitive sense that you know the answer.

The numbering is not accidental. System One is the more ancient of the two. It evolved first.



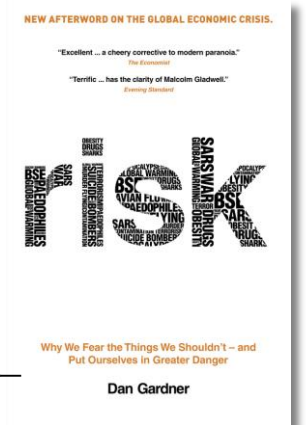
Because System One is fast and System Two is slow, One delivers a snap judgment which Two can then reflect on and maintain, or adjust, or replace. But will Two actually get involved?

It routinely will not. Most people, when they experience a strong intuitive sense that they know the answer, will not consciously test that intuition to ensure it is logical and supported by the best available evidence. They will just go with it.

This means System One, not Two, is the primary source of our judgments.

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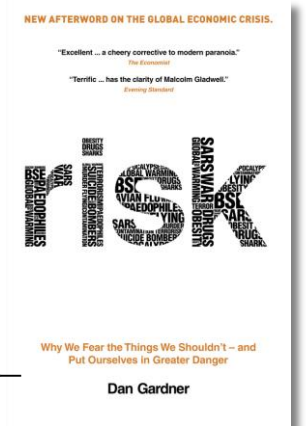


“System One and System Two” are forgettable terms so the psychologist Jonathan Haidt created a memorable metaphor: the elephant and the rider.

Sitting on top, the rider (System Two) thinks he’s in charge and his decisions determine where he goes. He is deluded. If the elephant wants to walk west, it will walk west; the rider will simply go along for the ride, perhaps occupying himself by rationalizing why he, in fact, wanted to go west.

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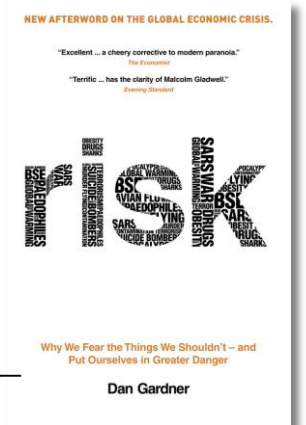
Given that the elephant is by far the dominant partner in the relationship, we must understand how it thinks.

So how does it make lightning-fast decisions? It does not think carefully about all the available evidence. If it did, it would be as slow as System Two — and our ancient ancestors would have died out long ago.

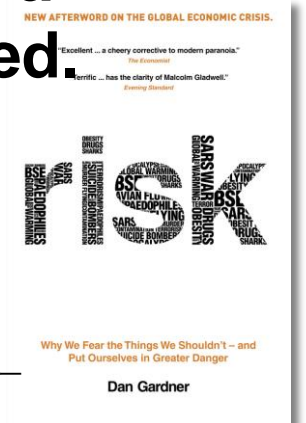
Instead, it applies simple rules to small bits of information. These rules may not be perfect but they generally work — at least in the environment in which our brains evolved. There are many such rules. Following are a few critical to risk judgments.

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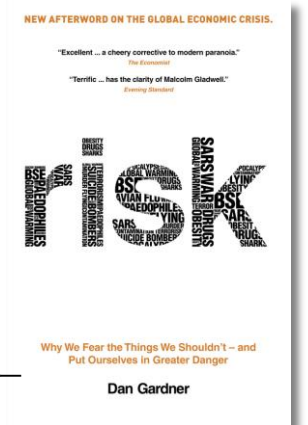
- 1. Familiarity heuristic:** The more unfamiliar something is, the more worrisome; the more familiar, the safer.
- 2. Availability heuristic:** If something can easily be called to mind, it is common; if it is a struggle to think of an example, it is uncommon. This is critical to the human tendency to see current trends continuing. It is also why an emotional story can be so much more influential than a statistic.
- 3. Affect heuristic:** The more a thing generates bad feelings, the riskier it is; greater positive feeling means greater safety. Remember that feelings can be extremely subtle. They can even be experienced unconsciously. This is a key component of “intuitive toxicology” — any amount of a stigmatized substance renders the whole dangerously contaminated.
- 4. Social heuristic:** What our peers think is massively influential.



Heuristics can often be used to “speak to the elephant.” For example, lotteries encourage people to daydream about winning in part because daydreams create vivid mental images of the happy event happening — which, when run through the availability heuristic, increase the perceived likelihood of winning the lottery.

More generally, speaking to the elephant means using the language of the elephant. Instead of science and statistics, use:

Experience and senses; story; affect; image; association; analogy; metaphor; tangible words; social affinity.

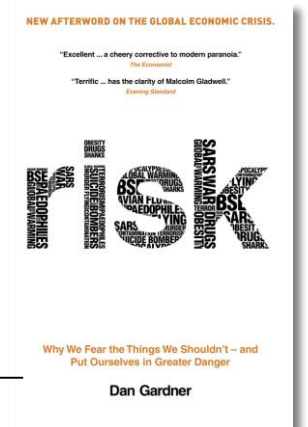


The simplest conclusion to draw from all this is that waving science and statistics at people is extremely unlikely to influence their thinking. And if that weren't obvious enough, we have decades of experience that demonstrate the same point. Don't shovel numbers at people. It's a waste of time.

But in so many fields and industries, how do people seek to convince others? They shovel numbers. And when that doesn't work, they shovel more numbers. And when that doesn't work, they say people are stupid or irrational. Nothing is accomplished. The only change is growing hostility.

This approach makes as much sense as the tourist who discovers a local doesn't speak her language so she speaks more loudly.

And yet it happens constantly. Why?

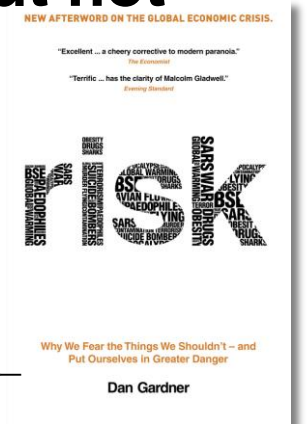


Remember “naive realism”? It’s the assumption that what we see is objective reality.

Naive realism is wrong. Our brains mix sensory inputs and other elements — such as expectations — to paint a picture of reality. That picture is inherently subjective. We each have our own.

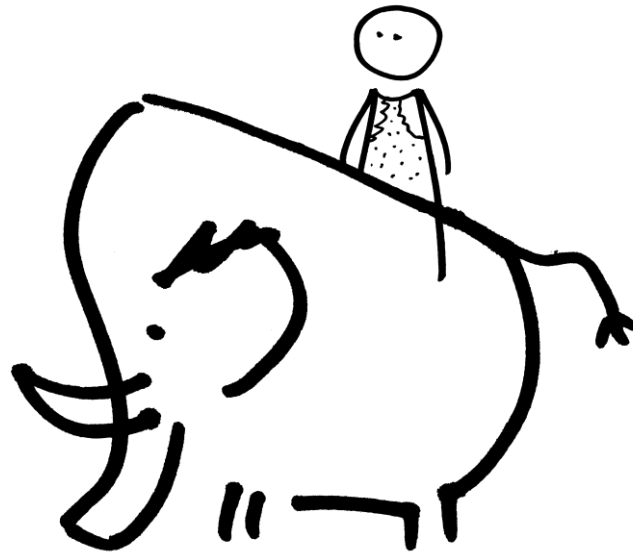
But thanks to naive realism, we assume that others will see things as we do if they look at what we are looking at. It follows that if others do not share our views, they have not seen what we have seen. And if we show it to them, they will see what we see — and change their minds.

When that fails, we become frustrated. How can you see what I see but not believe what I believe?! You must be stupid or irrational.



The first step toward effective communication is recognizing that our own naive realism is a trap that must be avoided.

Then we must understand how people really think. And that, paradoxically, means learning how to speak to elephants.



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