People Do Not Motivatedly Reason Towards Believing That the World Is a Good Place for Others

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Extended Abstract

What are people motivated to believe about the world around them? There is a common intuition in the economics literature that people are more motivated to believe that they are in a “good” state of the world than in a “bad” state of the world, but tests of this typically focus on states where self interest is at stake (e.g. Weinstein 1980; Mobius et al. 2014; Eil and Rao 2011). This paper explores the role of motivated beliefs when people make inferences about states of the world that are good or bad for others.

When people receive information, they tend to distort their updating process towards beliefs that they are more motivated to hold, a bias called motivated reasoning. Much of the evidence for motivated reasoning involves making an assumption about what beliefs people are more motivated to hold, and then showing that there is distortion in the predicted direction. In this paper, I consider the reverse exercise: by looking at distorted inference, I back out what beliefs people are motivated to hold.

In a large online experiment, I test whether people engage in positivity-motivated reasoning on five topics: the survival rate of children with leukemia, global poverty rates, annual deaths in armed conflict, others’ happiness levels, and infant mortality rates. The main result is that there is no evidence for positivity- or negativity-motivated reasoning, and even modest effects can be ruled out. The result suggests that either there is connection between motivated reasoning and desired beliefs, or that desired beliefs do not noticeably incorporate the well-being of others.

To identify motivated reasoning, I conduct a large online experiment using the design of Thaler (2019), which looks at how subjects assess the veracity of information sources that tell them that the median of their belief distribution is too high or too low. In this environment, if a subject were Bayesian, she would infer nothing about the veracity of the source from its message; meanwhile, a motivated reasoner would infer that news that supports the beliefs he

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is motivated to hold is more likely to be “True News,” while news that opposes these beliefs is more likely to be “Fake News.” This design was validated in the contexts of politically-motivated and performance-motivated reasoning.

I find no evidence that subjects assess the positive messages differently than the negative messages. Subjects assess positive messages to be 57.7 percent likely to be from True News (standard error 0.7 percentage points) and negative messages to be 58.5 percent likely to be from True News (standard error 0.8 percentage points). The difference between these is -0.7 percentage points; this point estimate is statistically insignificantly different from zero ($p = 0.457$); and the 95-percent confidence interval is the range [-2.7 percentage points, 1.2 percentage points]. The confidence interval rules out effect sizes in either direction that are half as large as those for politically-driven motivated reasoning and those for performance-driven motivated reasoning in Thaler (2019).

Secondary tests of aggregate motivated reasoning generate the same qualitative result. Subjects are similarly likely to change their belief about the answer to the original question in a positive or negative direction after receiving the news. There is also no evidence that subjects' current beliefs are reflective of past positivity-motivated reasoning. The relevant test looks at whether subjects whose initial guesses are erroneously positive engage in more positivity-motivated reasoning in the experiment, and vice versa for subjects with overly negative initial guesses; there is no evidence that this is the case.

There is also no clear evidence for treatment heterogeneity by demographics, though there seems to be heterogeneity across questions. However, on each of the five questions, the treatment effect for positivity-motivated reasoning is lower than the overall treatment effect of politically-motivated and performance-motivated reasoning in Thaler (2019). More data would be necessary to further understand heterogeneities, as there is insufficient statistical power to make stronger claims.

The results from this experiment suggest that motivated beliefs do not depend much on whether the world is a good or bad place for others. This result relates to a growing literature that demonstrates that people may motivatedly reason to think poorly of others in order to further their own self interest (e.g. Dana, Weber, and Kuang 2007; Exley 2015; Di Tella et al. 2015). In particular, it demonstrates the chasm between people’s behavior (which is often very charitable towards others) and motivated beliefs (which seems to be primarily driven by self interest). Further work can explore whether motivated beliefs are more evoked when others’ well-being becomes more personalized, and explore which classes of emotions are more strongly associated with motivated reasoning.
References


