

PSY4301B
TAKE-HOME EXAM, SPRING 2020

Your essay should be 2500 words long, plus/minus 10%. This does not include the list of references. You can use a maximum of five (5) references in addition to any of the 13 articles and chapters on the course's reading list.

Please write one exam essay, either A or B:

A. How do Baumeister and Masicampo describe the functions of conscious thought in their 2010 article? Discuss strengths and weaknesses in their main assumptions.

B. Why do humans reason? Describe and discuss Mercier and Sperber's (2011) arguments for their argumentative theory.

ABOUT THE TAKE-HOME EXAM

In this take-home exam you have access, not only to the 13 articles and chapters on the course's obligatory reading list, but also to all the literature that's on the Internet. Of course, when knowledge is so readily available, it is extra important that you get your facts right.

Questions A and B both ask you to discuss certain issues. You should use this opportunity to demonstrate your judgment. In doing so, it can be especially helpful to consult scientific literature that is not on the reading list.

And remember: You must always cite the sources from which you have obtained the information you employ in your essay. American Psychological Association (APA) style is required for your in-text citations and references. Whether you use the APA 6 or the APA 7 style is up to you. (They are not very different.) Information on APA style can be found here:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/in_text_citations_the_basics.html

Good luck!

GRADING INSTRUCTIONS

A. Baumeister and Masicampo propose that conscious thought is for internal processing, to facilitate downstream interaction with the social and cultural environment. They point out that human consciousness enables the construction of meaningful, sequential thought, as in sentences and narratives, logical reasoning, counting and quantification, causal understanding, narratives, and the simulation of events (including nonpresent ones). They argue that conscious thought sequences resemble short films that the brain makes for itself, thereby enabling different parts of brain and mind to share information. The production of conscious thoughts is closely linked to the production of speech because the human mind evolved to facilitate social communication and information sharing, as culture became humankind's biological strategy. The influence of conscious thought on behavior, say Baumeister and Masicampo, can be vitally helpful but is mostly indirect. In their view, conscious simulation processes are useful for understanding the perspectives of social interaction partners, for exploring options in complex decisions, for replaying past events (both literally and counterfactually) so as to learn, and for facilitating participation in culture in other ways. Most assumptions made by Baumeister and Masicampo can be challenged in a decent discussion. However, the article's central claim is that conscious thought exists to facilitate interaction with the social and cultural environment. Hence this conjecture deserves the most thorough discussion.

B. Reasoning is often seen as a means to improve knowledge and make better decisions. However, much evidence shows that reasoning often leads to epistemic distortions and poor decisions. Hence Mercier and Sperber suggest that the function of reasoning should be rethought. Their hypothesis is that the function of reasoning is argumentative -- to devise and evaluate arguments intended to persuade. Reasoning so conceived is adaptive, they argue, given the exceptional dependence of humans on communication and their vulnerability to misinformation. A wide range of evidence in the psychology of reasoning and decision making can be reinterpreted and, say Mercier and Sperber, better explained in the light of this hypothesis. Poor performance in standard reasoning tasks is explained by the lack of argumentative context. However, skilled arguers, according to Mercier and Sperber, are not after the truth but after arguments supporting their views, which the authors see as an explanation for confirmation bias. Reasoning so motivated can distort evaluations and attitudes and allow erroneous beliefs to persist. Proactively used reasoning also favors decisions that are easy to justify but not necessarily better. In all these instances traditionally described as failures or flaws, say Mercier and Sperber, reasoning does exactly what can be expected of an argumentative device: Look for arguments that support a given conclusion, and, *ceteris paribus*, favor conclusions for which arguments can be found.

The claims made by Mercier and Sperber can be challenged -- by asking, for example: Is it really true that people do their best reasoning in an argumentative context? How sound are the evolutionary assumptions on which the theory rests? Other lines of attack are clearly also possible. Any discussion should be judged by the trustworthiness and relevance of the putative facts employed, and by the soundness of its arguments.