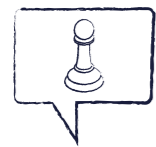


CHAPTER 6:

ARE WE ALL
BIASED?





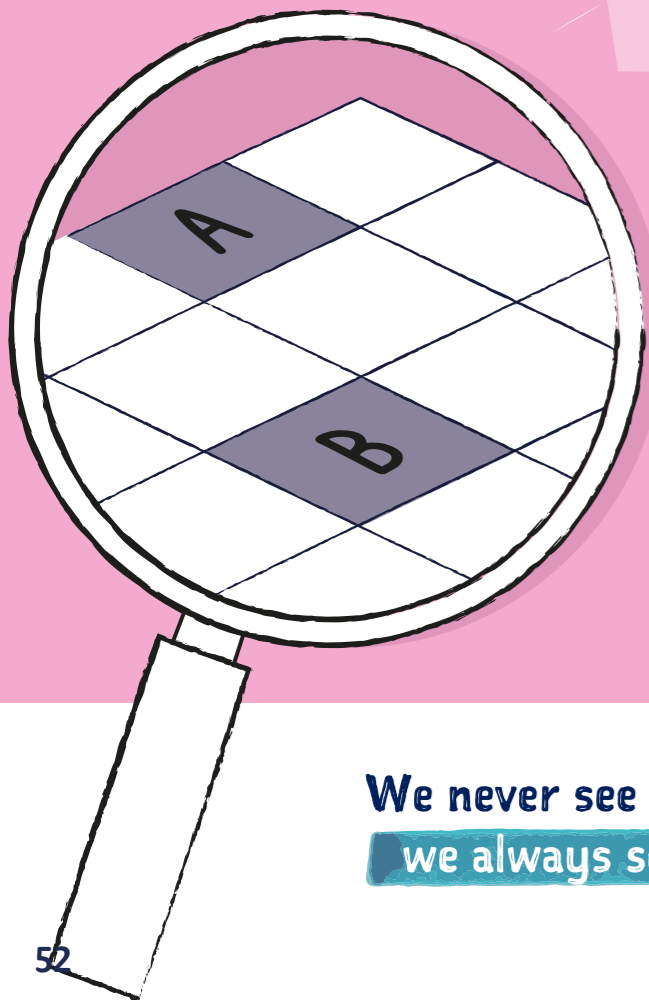
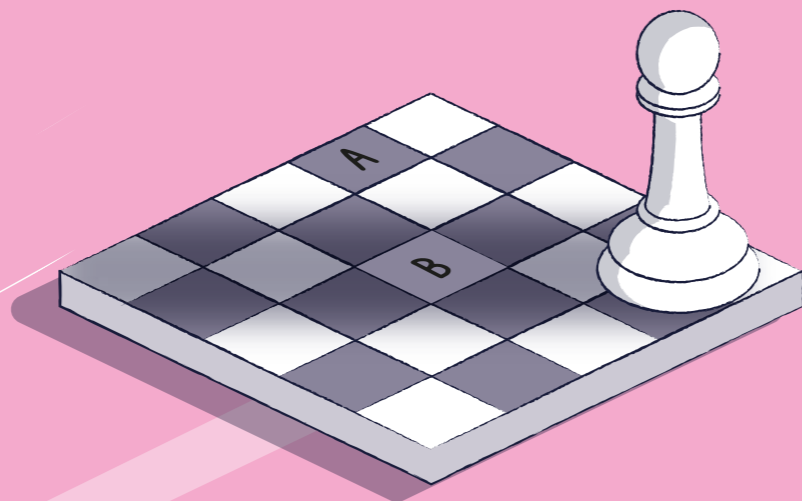
ARE WE ALL BIASED?



Do you see things clearly?
Do you see them for what they are, or are you being fooled?

Well, let's look at the checkerboard on the right. What is the colour of square A? Black, obviously, or more precisely very dark grey. What is the colour of square B? White, obviously, or more precisely very light grey. This is not the colour that they are, it's the colour that you perceive.

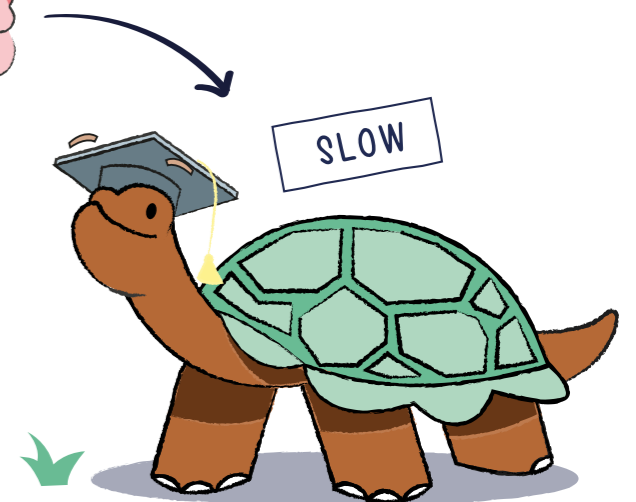
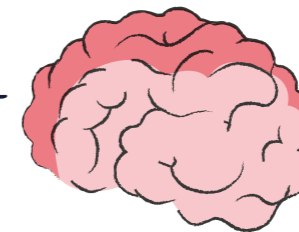
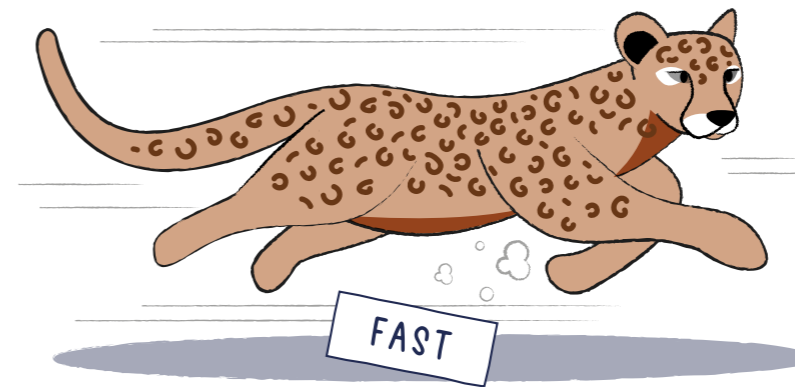
The truth is that both of those squares are grey – the exact same grey...



Look, this is A and this B. Looks exactly the same, right? But on the chessboard, why does B look so much lighter?

Because you have been tricked by your own brain. **We never see things "as they are", we always see them in context.** Here, the context is a checkerboard, alternating dark and light squares. This context tells us that A has to be dark, and B has to be light. Your brain will make them look very different, so you can understand what's in the image very quickly: you immediately see a checkerboard.

We never see things "as they are", we always see them in context.



Our minds have two ways of thinking: a fast way and a slow way. The fast one is very convenient: it makes sense quickly, without much effort. It's useful most of the time – usually you want to know that an object is a checkerboard, not what is the exact colour of the squares. However, this way of thinking is easily tricked by the context, by previous experiences, by stereotypes or common representations. This kind of "trick" is called a bias.

The other way of thinking is, well... slow. Slow, and tiring. Just look at how much time and effort is needed just to check that A and B are actually the same colour. Trying to analyse things rationally, to check the details, to verify that what you perceive as "obvious" is actually true, is exhausting. But in some situations, it's crucial!

Let's look at a common bias: the confirmation bias.

If you are a pilot and you really want to fly home, you will be tempted to overlook the reasons to stay on the ground ("Hmm, there is a huge storm coming...") and focus on the reasons to leave ("oh well, the storms here never last too long, so maybe I'll be able to avoid them"). You will be tempted to pay most attention to what you would like to hear... and this confirmation bias may lead to very big mistakes.

We cannot eliminate biases, but we can become aware of them. And we can stop and ask ourselves, "Is that a situation where I might be biased? Then maybe I should pause, think slowly, and not let the bias trick me...".





THE ACCIDENT

A FATHER AND SON ARE IN A CAR. THEY HAVE A TERRIBLE CAR CRASH, AND THE DAD DIES INSTANTLY. THE SON IS BROUGHT TO THE HOSPITAL. THE SURGEON COMES TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM, THEN LOOKS AT THE BOY, SUDDENLY STOPS AND SAYS:

“I can’t operate - that boy is my son!”.



IS THERE SOMETHING STRANGE IN THIS STORY? WELL, IF THE STORY SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE, IT MAY BE BECAUSE YOUR BIASES TRICKED YOU... THE SITUATION DESCRIBED IS RATHER DRAMATIC, SO PROBABLY THE EMOTION MADE YOU THINK IN A FAST WAY, BUT TAKE YOUR TIME, READ AGAIN...

It’s all simple and clear! No?
You will find a solution at the end of the chapter,
if needed.



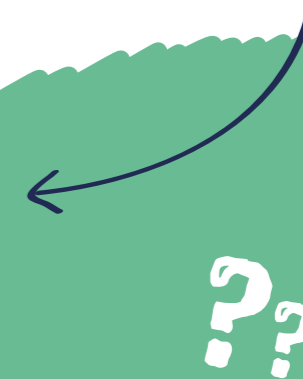
MICHAEL

READ THE STORY ABOUT MICHAEL BELOW. IS IT MORE PROBABLE THAT MICHAEL IS A LIBRARIAN OR A FARMER?



THE FARMER

Michael is a reserved person and an introvert, always ready to help others, but with little interest in the world. He likes order, tidying things up, and he has great attention to detail.



THE LIBRARIAN

Michael is a reserved person and an introvert, always ready to help others, but with little interest in the world. He likes order, tidying things up, and he has great attention to detail.



By the way, how biased are these visualisations of Michael’s profession?

ACTIVITY
3

CONFIRMATION BIAS

LET'S DIVE A BIT FURTHER INTO THE CONFIRMATION BIAS. WE USUALLY TEND TO REMARK AND REMEMBER THE INFORMATION THAT CONFIRMS OUR OPINIONS, AND TO QUESTION, DISCARD OR FORGET THE INFORMATION THAT GOES AGAINST WHAT WE THINK. **IN OTHER WORDS, WE TEND TO FOCUS ON THE INFORMATION THAT CONFIRMS WHAT WE ALREADY BELIEVE.**

TRY TO THINK ABOUT HOW YOU REACTED WHEN SHARING NEWS, DISCUSSING WITH YOUR FAMILY OR ARGUING WITH YOUR FRIENDS: COULD YOU SPOT THIS CONFIRMATION BIAS IN OTHERS? OR MORE DIFFICULT: COULD YOU SPOT THIS CONFIRMATION BIAS IN YOUR OWN THINKING?



In the next few weeks, try to pay attention to your own reactions, and become aware of this confirmation bias. Remember, we cannot make it disappear, **but we can become aware of it!**

SOLUTIONS

Don't read before you try out the activities!

SOLUTION OF ACTIVITY 1:



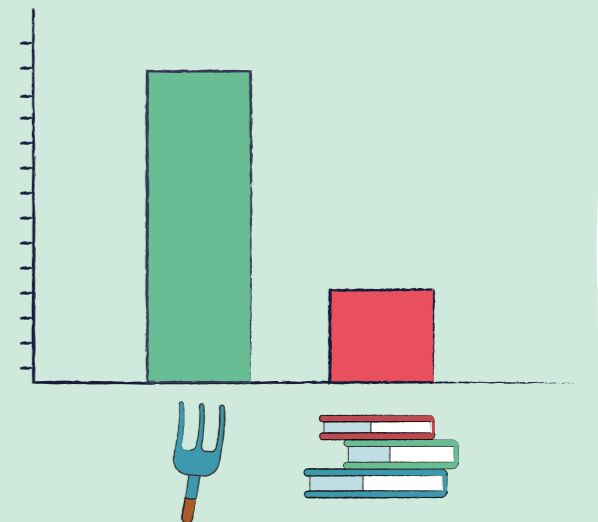
Very often readers think the surgeon is the father, and it may appear impossible as the father has been killed in the car crash. Well... Common stereotypes have us imagine the surgeon as a man, but many surgeons are women! So the surgeon may simply be the mother of the child. Also, families with two fathers exist everywhere, and in some countries marriage between two men is legal.



SOLUTION OF ACTIVITY 2:

There are two ways to solve this question. If you think fast, the context will influence you. The description of Michael's character probably made you think he was a librarian... But if we try to think slowly, with less bias... Which job is most probable?

Well, in your country, are there more farmers or more librarians? Probably a lot more farmers! So, whatever Michael's personality is, it is much more probable that he is a farmer!



Extra resources: If you wish to learn more and even face your own biases, have a look at [Project Implicit](#), and try doing one of their Implicit Association Tests online. You can also read the wonderful book [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#) from the psychologist Daniel Kahneman.