

# Are creationists rational?

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**Abstract** Creationism is usually regarded as an irrational set of beliefs. In this paper I propose that the best way to understand why individual learners settle on any mature set of beliefs is to see that as the developmental outcome of a series of “fast and frugal” boundedly rational inferences rather than as a rejection of reason. This applies to those whose views are opposed to science in general. A bounded rationality model of belief choices both serves to explain the fact that folk traditions tend to converge on “anti-modernity”, and to act as a default hypothesis, deviations from which we can use to identify other, arational, influences such as social psychological, economic and individual dispositions. I propose some educational and public policy strategies that might decrease the proportion of learners who find creationism and anti-science in general a rational choice.

**Keywords** Bounded rationality · Epistemic commitment · Creationism · Anti-modernism

Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic. [Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §611]

## 1 Kinds of rationality

A question I have wondered about for a long time is this: why do people become creationists? Nobody is born a creationist (or an evolutionist, or a Mayan cosmic-cyclist,

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etc.). These are views that one acquires as one learns and integrates into society. But we live, notionally, in a society in which science has learned more about the world in 300 years than in the prior million or so. So why do people become creationists when the bulk of modern thought depends so heavily on science?

We can treat this as a general question about those who reject some or all of science—global warming sceptics, HIV-deniers and so forth. “Creationist” here is an instance or representative of this general phenomenon of opposing science in modern society.

I ask this question as someone who once was a creationist, although I was troubled by it at the time. I know why *I* took it up, and why I abandoned it, but I wonder whether my experience generalizes? To work through this, I am going to make a rather counterintuitive assumption—creationists are being rational in their choice of world view. Parenthetically, creationists and intelligent designists often claim that science is “just” another religion, and so can be treated as commensurate with their theological views. By using the phrase “world view”, I do not intend to give this any purchase. I mean literally that creationists’ view of the world is the outcome of belief choices, not that they have, or that science offers, a coherent set of self-supporting beliefs. We usually attack creationists as being ignorant and irrational, but suppose that they are not. Suppose that every step in their doctrinal development is the best available choice for them at the moment. In short, suppose that they *are* acting as “rational agents” in some to be determined sense. What then?

Before we proceed, let us specify definitions, and present the epistemological foundation for this claim. “Rational” means different things to different people, and in philosophy it traditionally means something like “making the best inference on the basis of the best evidence”. So an ideally rational agent is one who has all the time in the world to gather and evaluate evidence logically, on the basis of the best available goals, using a “wide reflective equilibrium” method, which means making sure that all your epistemic commitments are maximally coherent with each other. This is at best an unachievable state for ordinary people.

Of course, traditional philosophy does not require that we are ideally rational, only that we asymptotically approach that ideal, in order to qualify as “rational”. We are, however, expected to take into account future expectations as well as present ones, and think our views through in hard detail. But even this seems unrealistic. Cognitive psychology indicates that far from being the, or a, norm, almost nobody is rational in this sense.

This is worrisome. What use is a notion of “rationality” as an explanation of epistemic choices if nobody actually does it, or even seriously approaches it in practice? Are we left with a view of reason that only Marvin the Paranoid Android can attain (no wonder he was depressed!)? Others have thought this equally worrisome, including Herbert Simon, and more recently the ABC Group set up by Gerd Gigerenzer and Peter Todd (now at Bloomington, Indiana) at the Center for Adaptive Behavior and Cognition at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin.

Gigerenzer and his colleagues (Gigerenzer 2000; Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996; Gigerenzer and Selten 2001; Gigerenzer et al. 1999) propose what they call, following (Simon 1986, 1978, 1990), “bounded rationality”. This is the rationality you have when time is limited and you must make quick, or as they call them, “fast and frugal”, heuristic decisions based on limited information. Simon wrote: