Essay 2: Heuristics

Heuristics are simple “rule-of-thumb” strategies that can help us to make decisions efficiently. These strategies allow us to process things without having to consciously think about every detail involved and because of this they are extremely helpful for focusing our conscious processing on things that are more challenging. From forming representations in our minds, to predicting characteristics of objects, and copying other people’s behavior; heuristics make everyday decisions easier.

The mental representations we create are a product of heuristics and allow us to model situations not currently available to us. For example, we can imagine getting from one class to that next one by creating a ‘mental map’. It is not important that we have a ‘mental map’ that is as complex as the real world, we can leave out information such as how many trees we pass by because all of this extra information require much more brain space. We can still create a sufficient map in our minds without all of this extra information in our representations and solve problems using them.

Another useful heuristic is a familiarity heuristic, where we use past experiences to make conclusions in a new environment. For instance, if you had an allergic reaction every time you ate a red fruit in the past and encountered a new red fruit, you would likely believe that you would have an allergic reaction if you ate it. By treating situations based on our past experiences we can often make more informed, and quicker decisions without having to think about as many possible outcomes. This makes life much easier and allows us to combine different experiences to form complex predictions about our actions.

We also use social cues as a heuristic for our own behavior. If other people are doing something we assume that they are doing it correctly and we should also behave this way. We may choose to go to the restaurant that has more positive reviews from other people online instead of going to each resteraunt in person to determine which one we should eat at. It is much easier to conform to the behavior and beliefs of people around us and simplifies our thought process by following what seems to work for everyone else.

Heuristics allow us to simplify tasks in our lives and think more efficiently. Mental representations, past experiences, and social cues are just some of the many heuristics we use everyday to simplify our lives and reduce our demand for conscious processing.