

Framing, scales, and human rationality

Bart Geurts

There is a widespread rumour in the behavioural sciences that the experimental record shows that people are irredeemably irrational. In this talk I discuss one of the more popular pieces of evidence that have been adduced in favour of this claim, and argue that it shows exactly the opposite.

Starting with Tversky and Kahneman's Asian Disease study, psychologists have collected a wealth of experimental data showing that the way a problem is framed may have an effect on people's choices and decisions. Based on a semantic analysis of evaluative expressions like "good", I propose a principled explanation of such framing effects. The key idea is that our choices and decisions reveal a counterfactual systematicity: they carry information about the choices and decisions we would have made if the facts had been otherwise. It is these counterfactual alternatives that may diverge between otherwise equivalent versions of the same task, and thus explain the effects of framing.