The Goldilocks Fallacy

When faced with a range of options, we often choose an intermediate one without much thought. This Goldilocks heuristic serves us well in many circumstances. In the presence of conflict, we seek compromise. We keep to the middle of our lanes when driving, without consciously reasoning why this is a really good idea. And when we see seven predictions for a hurricane’s path, we intuitively assign higher likelihood to the intermediate predictions and less to the extremes, without consciously invoking the Law of Large Numbers. All of these mental shortcuts have some justification.

But we also apply this Goldilocks heuristic in questionable ways. This presentation focuses on the idea that, in making choices when there are conflicting objectives – which are very common – choosing a middle path often fails to give you the best decision. In fact, sometimes it leads to the worst. We’ll examine an analytic framework that allows us to quantify what “often” and “sometimes” really mean, and we’ll also examine the psychological reasons that drive us to make these poor Goldilocks decisions.



Bio:

Dr Pete Vanden Bosch is an adjunct mathematics professor at Marymount University and Northern Virginia Community College. He retired from the Air Force as the chief analyst and scientific advisor for NORAD and US Northern Command and then performed homeland security studies for a small think tank for several years. His current research interests are in educational psychology.